FEBRUARY 2012
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THE PEOPLE'S WATCHDOG

TORM CLOUDS AHEAD
inimise the risk
your super

247 products reviewed!

THE GREAT DE-CIDER
Top apple tipples

IP, UP AND AWAY
odging hidden irline costs

TESTS

- eBook readers
- Microwaves
- Compact cameras
- Blu-ray players
- Washing machines
- Pressure cleaners
- Cordless phones
- Vacuums

All together now

The joys of community sharing

Why do it alone?

CHOICE has always embraced the ideals of community and collaboration. Consumers are increasingly doing the same.

By coming together, CHOICE members create a social business based on sharing the best-quality information, advice and support on products and services available. There are increasing numbers of businesses – some social, some commercial – embracing a similar concept of sharing in their markets.

Last year I met the remarkable Lisa Gansky, a serial entrepreneur, founder of photo-sharing site Ofoto and author of *The Mesh*, which seeks to understand and explain the new world of sharing. In her book, Lisa charts the success of many new sharing-based businesses. Examples include Scott Martin's Christmas tree scheme in California, Boris Bikes in London (nicknamed for the city's mayor) and roomorama.com, a site that matches people renting out their homes with those seeking short-term rentals. Many sharing schemes make life cheaper, are often more environmentally sustainable and provide a good deal of interest and a lot of fun along the way.

This issue, we turn our minds to the subject of sharing and offer some helpful tips on how you can get involved. Companies such as Rentachook, GoGet and Gumtree allow you to do everything from sharing food to cars and homes. For many, sharing provides a solution to the challenge of cutting back while still having access to goods and services. Read about it on page 18.

We also highlight online flight booking traps (page 16) – endless pages of options for services including some you're opted in to and can end up purchasing unintentionally. As well, we reveal the results of our first ever cider taste test. Cider sales have seen a 35% increase in dollar spend in Australia in the past year, albeit off a relatively low base. For my generation growing up in the UK, it was the first alcohol drunk by many young people and therefore rarely revisited thereafter! But I notice 45 new cider brands have been introduced here over the past two years, so perhaps it's time to take another sip.

Find out how you can book a chook on page 18

And in case you thought (or even hoped) we'd allowed Valentine's Day to pass us by, we have a fascinating story on dating sites (page 20). For many people of all ages, this has become the new way to meet someone.

It would be remiss of me not to mention that you're entitled and indeed encouraged to tour the CHOICE labs and to talk to me and other members of staff. Last year we hosted 26 such events, and I hope this year there will be more. If you can't make it in to our HQ, please call or email me – I'm always very happy to hear your thoughts about CHOICE or your consuming lives in general.

Nick Stace, CEO
Phone: 1800 266 786
Email: nick@choice.com.au
Twitter: @nickstacetweets

CHOICE. The People's Watchdog

CHOICE gives you the power to choose the very best goods and services, and avoid the worst. We pay full price for all the products we test, so we remain 100% independent. We don't take advertising and we don't accept freebies from industry. We're not a government body and our consumer publishing and advocacy is almost entirely funded by subscriptions to our magazines, **choice.com.au** and from other services we supply to benefit members and consumers. CHOICE product ratings are based on lab tests, expert assessments and consumer surveys. CHOICE staff also research a wide range of consumer services. They reveal the truth behind the facts and figures, and investigate the quality and the claims.

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PEFC PEFC/29-31-141 Promoting Sustainable Forest Management www.pefc.org

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Here's cheers to our top-rated apple and pear cider selections on page 28

CHOICE's Rachel Clemons serves up some quality summer bubbles

Avoiding a fatal shot

When you buy a coffee from your local café, do you really know how much caffeine you're getting?

A study conducted by the University of Glasgow tested 20 single espresso shots available in coffee chains and cafes, and discovered huge differences in the caffeine levels of a shot, ranging from 51mg to a whopping 322mg. Previous research had estimated a typical espresso shot at about 50mg.

This research is not great news for those who need to limit their daily intake. Pregnant women are advised to limit their caffeine intake to 200mg a day, while caffeine can also affect those on oral contraceptives, young people and people with liver problems. According to the researchers, the occasional commercially prepared coffee should be OK, but people at risk should take care with how much caffeine they consume overall.

KATE BROWNE

Knock them out

Consumers fed up with door-to-door salesmen are one step closer to getting rid of them, with the Consumer Action Law Centre (CALC) launching a campaign seeking to deter unsolicited door-knocking. CALC has released free Do Not Knock stickers, available at donotknock.org.au, designed to warn unsolicited salespeople that they're committing trespass by entering a property and knocking on the door after being advised not to. The Tasmanian government has also made Do Not Knock stickers available at service.tas.gov.au.

DAVID HILL

Love is in the air

$422m
The amount Australians will spend on romantic getaways this Valentine's Day

$39.86
The predicted per-person spend on Valentine's Day 2012

$909m
The total amount that will be spent on Valentine's Day in 2012

Projections: IBISWorld

BREAKING NEWS

Dud diets

Australian dieticians recently voted on the three worst diets to avoid in 2012. More than 50 experts took part in an online survey to rate a list of nine popular fad diets. Coming in first was the lemon detox diet, with an overwhelming 80% of votes, followed by the celebrity-endorsed blood type diet and the acid and alkaline diet. Keep an eye out for our investigationof diet clinics in the next issue of *CHOICE*.

App green light

Consumers can now scan barcodes on food items with their iPhone or iPad to instantly see nutritional information in the form of traffic lights. The FoodSwitch app, available from the iTunes store, has been launched by The George Institute for Global Health and health insurer Bupa. The app suggests healthier alternatives to scanned products and allows users to save product information. It will help shoppers make healthier choices ahead of a front-of-pack labelling system, expected to be introduced by the end of 2012.

Deal with it

Woolworths has joined the group buying/daily deals avalanche in Australia, expanding its online offering to include Door Buster, a daily deals site. Launched in January, it uses a different supply chain to the bricks-and-mortar supermarkets and claims to offer savings for shoppers.

What's the buzz on this electric car?

We took the i-MiEV (Mitsubishi Innovative Electric Vehicle), the first mass-produced electric car available to consumers in Australia, for a spin to find out how it feels to drive and other first impressions.

MITSUBISHI i-MiEV
PRICE $48,800
CONTACT mitsubishi.com.au
★★★½☆

Performance The i-MiEV is designed for city driving and short distance trips only. It claims a maximum range of 150km, but it lost two-thirds of its power after we ran it for 80km, so 120km is a more likely maximum. It takes about seven hours for a full charge to the battery, and Mitsubishi recommends a 15A electric connection for recharging – the same kind of plug you'll find powering your stove, and one you'll need to spend extra money to get an electrician to install in your garage. Charging requirements rule out street parking, and given many inner-city dwellers don't have access to a garage or carport, we look forward to charging stations springing up around convenient locations in the future (an Australian standard is currently being developed that focuses on the infrastructure of electric cars).

The i-MiEV goes from 0 to 100km/h in a slow 14.3 seconds, but once it's doing 30km/h it responds well. It decelerates quickly at low speeds, its brakes feel powerful enough to stop the car safely, and while steering is light, it's fairly direct. The ride is bouncy as it's a short wheel-based car with the batteries mounted below the rear seat. With the motor just in front of the rear axle there is a lot of weight in the back. When driving behind a large truck, the car tends to move side to side due to the turbulence created by the truck – also a result of the light front end.

Comfort The driver's seat is firm and unsupportive, but that's no big issue as the car can't be driven over long distances. There's air-conditioning for hot summer days that Mitsubishi claims turns off when the range shortens. There's no engine noise but there is a fair bit of tyre noise entering the car at higher speeds.

Savings We found that with the running cost savings (based on using electricity at current pricing) it would take 4.3 years to make up for the high purchase price compared with purchasing a similarly sized petrol vehicle using about 7L/100km.

CHOICE VERDICT

The i-MiEV meets its claims, but given its price tag and issues with charging, we can't fully recommend it.

MATTHEW STEEN

FIRST LOOK

ISTOCK PHOTO

Bad APPles

Low-cost or free smartphone apps can end up costing more than you bargained for. CHOICE member James found this out the hard way when he recently downloaded a free currency converter app.

James got into trouble when he clicked on an in-app ad for a competition to win an iPad. He was connected to a third party, Skill2Thrill, which signed him up for a premium SMS service. James was $20 out of pocket by the time he called his phone provider, Amaysim, to block the charges. After checking it out more thoroughly later, James discovered the competition appeared to be bogus, at least judging by the out-dated list on Skill2Thrill's website. One user, Mona Dib, has apparently won the competition 45 times, sometimes in the same month. Other prize winners also appear to win more than once.

In a letter to James, Skill2Thrill maintained it met all mandatory disclosure laws. Amaysim refunded his $20 in good faith with a reminder that consumers can choose to block premium service numbers to avoid unwanted charges. **BRENDAN MAYS**

The ACL in action

The new Australian Consumer Law will be put to the test in Victoria this year after the Consumer Action Law Centre (CALC) issued proceedings against an internship agency.

CALC alleges the agency included unfair terms in their contracts and refused to honour statutory consumer guarantees about the service they provided.

To complement this and other test cases under the ACL, the ACCC has indicated they have a number of priorities for the new year. These include the development of a regulatory framework for the National Broadband Network, the monitoring of price hikes attributed to the carbon tax, and greater scrutiny of competitive practices between retailers and their online rivals.

ACCC Chairman Rod Sims also indicated late last year that supermarkets and the fuel sector would receive the attention from the regulator due to the concentrated nature of competition within these industries.

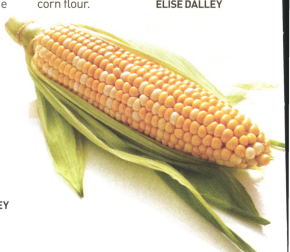
He has flagged Woolworths and Coles for their current market dominance, which he says, if left unregulated, may have a detrimental effect at the checkout in years to come. For a full update on the ACL, see our feature story on page 34.

ELISE DALLEY

That's corny

Submissions to change the Food Standards Code in Australia to allow foods made from genetically modified corn have now closed, and consumers can expect to hear by May whether an application by multinational company Syngenta Seeds has been successful.

If the Food Standards board gives the application a green light, the corn, modified for protection against insect pests, will be cultivated in North America and Canada and may be made available to Australian consumers in imported goods, such as muesli bars or products containing corn flour. **ELISE DALLEY**



Look for this T-QUAL Tick logo

Holiday tick of approval

Tourism Australia has launched a national tourism accreditation framework, covering accommodation, attractions and dining, which it says will help consumers identify quality services. Under the scheme, accredited businesses are entitled to carry the T-QUAL Tick symbol (above).

According to Tourism Minister Martin Ferguson, T-QUAL businesses have all required licences and insurance and have committed to additional standards in risk and environmental management and customer service.

SIOBAHN DONOHOE

Unfair contracts loophole closing

The federal government has taken another step towards ensuring consumers who purchase insurance get the same protection as with other financial products with the release of a draft regulation impact statement.

Because of a legal technicality, unfair contract terms legislation doesn't apply to insurance contracts. The government is now looking at options to address this.

98%
Overall number of insurance claims paid

In 2008-09, about 31 million insurance policies were held in Australia. While 98% of claims were paid overall, some types of insurance had more rejected claims than others, such as travel insurance with nine per cent of claims rejected. Submissions can be made to icareview@treasury.gov.au until 17 February 2012.

UTA MIHM

Win/win situation

CHOICE is celebrating two consumer victories, with the ACCC removing unsafe teeth whitening products and a probiotic manufacturer improving labelling on its products.

The ACCC has stepped in after a CHOICE investigation in June 2011 (see choice.com.au/teethwhitening) found some at-home teeth whiteners contained dangerous levels of peroxide, which may lead to burns, ulcerations and/or headaches. Several products have been recalled, including some manufactured by White My Bite, Ozbrite, Whitestrips, Brighter Smile, BDazzled, Whitesmile and DaVinci Elite, and can be returned to their place of purchase for a refund. Teeth whitening products should not be used if they contain more than six per cent hydrogen peroxide or 18% carbamine peroxide, or don't specify their concentration.

In a further win, Yakult has agreed to improve its product labelling after we reported on the inadequate labelling and pseudo-science of probiotic yoghurts and drinks (see *CHOICE*, July 2011 and choice.com.au/probiotics). We argued that specific probiotic bacteria strains and quantities should be disclosed on labels. Yakult has now redesigned its packaging to include this information.

DAVID HILL

ISTOCK PHOTO: TOURISM AUSTRALIA COPYRIGHT

Just the facts, please

Beginning this year, banks need to provide you with a key facts sheet when you enquire about a home loan. The new one-page summary will make it easier for you to compare loans, fees and ongoing costs, and the move follows key recommendations of CHOICE's Better Banking campaign. The federal government has launched a website and ad campaign promoting the fact sheets, along with other banking reforms, but the real test occurs when you approach a bank. We recently visited some Big Four bank branches to see if the facts were straight.

Posing as a first-home buyer looking to borrow about $300,000, we asked if they had comparative fee and interest information we could take away. While the staff suggested we apply for pre-approval and dealt out brochures, none supplied a key facts sheet.

To make matters worse, NAB did not have a key facts sheet readily available on its website at the time of writing. Considering the reforms have been a long time coming, we expect better and hope that access to key facts sheets improves in the near future.

ELIZABETH McNESS

384

Total adoptions in Australia in 2010–11, the lowest annual number on record

12,019

Babies born in 2009 as a result of IVF treatment in Australia

9%

Percentage of couples who experience infertility

Source: AIHW

An unhealthy approach?

The government has yet to get serious about initiating reform in the way the Therapeutic Goods Administration handles complementary medicine despite numerous reviews, the Consumers Health Forum of Australia (CHF) says.

According to CHF head Carol Bennett, the government's rejection of the longstanding demand that complementary product sponsors comply with an industry code of conduct is a missed opportunity to protect consumers against risks.

CHF is also disappointed that the advertising of therapeutic goods and labelling of complementary medicines "will be subject to even more consultation before any changes can take place," Bennett says. "We've had countless reviews over the past decade on these issues, each of them suggesting major regulatory change. Unfortunately, successive governments have shown a reluctance to implement the wholesale reform that is needed."

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

WHOOPS **The table on p.24 of *CHOICE*, Dec 2011/Jan 2012 contained a mistake. The correct total price (including $246 in fees) for the Bing Lee interest-free deal was $1446, 20.49% more than the minimum purchase price of $1200. In the same issue, the Weber Baby Q tested on p.44 was labelled the Q 100E, when it is in fact the Baby Q 100. It's available at all Weber stockists and retails for $289. Also, the current RRP for the Beefeater Sportzgrill is $499, not $396.**

The car rental company that so impressed Les McFarland by going the extra mile (*CHOICE*, November 2011 p.15) was not in fact Budget, but Tasmanian-owned company AutoRent, who contacted us to set the record straight. Mr McFarland has since confirmed this.

Flooded by confusion

The Financial Ombudsman Service has pointed to a pattern among insurance companies of mixing up flood and stormwater damage.

In a recent review of claim determinations, the FOS documented a series of instances in which insurers have denied claims on the grounds the damage was caused by flood waters, which the policies in question did not cover. But a careful review of hydrology reports and evidence by the FOS showed that the initial damage was often caused by storm, even though floods may have followed. The crucial matter of timing has led the FOS to rule in favour of policyholders in a number of disputes.

The FOS says site inspections, discussions with policyholders and other evidence has persuaded it that "in many cases the initial source of inundation was stormwater run-off, and that the insurer had not, on the balance of probabilities, established the application of the flood exclusion at least to the initial inundation of the property".

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

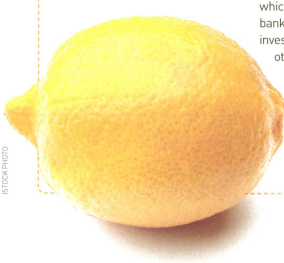
Shonky shutdown

Shonky Award 2008 winner mortgage trust Equititrust has been wound up by the Supreme Court of Queensland.

"You wouldn't buy a telly without a warranty... so why would you invest without one?" was the question posed in ads by Equititrust in 2008, which offered rates slightly above banks' term deposit rates and used investors' money for developer and other property loans. But CHOICE discovered that the warranty was nowhere near as good as it sounded.

ASIC has since suspended Equititrust's Australian Financial Services Licence.

UTA MIHM



ISTOCKPHOTO

ANZ's solo act

After the last fall in official interest rates in December 2011, ANZ announced it would no longer make interest rate decisions in reaction to RBA changes. Instead, the bank will hold its own monthly review of rates on the second Friday of each month, which is typically a week and a half after the RBA's own monthly meeting.

The first of these meetings, held on 13 January, saw no changes, but it also came in a month when the RBA does not meet.

Many commentators agree the RBA cash rate does not accurately reflect bank funding costs. However, ANZ should be transparent when it comes to making decisions on interest rates. CHOICE is keen to see whether ANZ intends to show changes in its funding costs transparently and consistently. Likewise, where ANZ's cost of funds declines we'd expect to see lending rates reduce by the same amount.

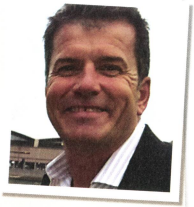
We're also interested to know if ANZ intends to end the "easy up and sticky down" approach we currently see, where interest rate rises are passed on almost immediately yet there is a considerable lag before any interest rate cuts are passed on.

CHOICE advises consumers to look closely at the deal they're getting from their bank and keep an eye out for something better. With the banning of mortgage exit fees last year, the recent introduction of key facts sheets (see far left) and easier account switching on its way from 1 July, consumers need to know for sure whether switching is right for them.

ELIZABETH McNESS

choice MEMBERS NOTICEBOARD

Member spotlight



Introducing CHOICE member Dominic Ogburn, a single dad with two young sons. Dominic is a self-employed building consultant. He also offers online training to the building industry nationally.

Why did you join CHOICE?

For the access to independent reviews and tests of products and services. I'm also a strong consumer advocate.

What section of *CHOICE* magazine do you read first and why?

I read reviews and tests first. I enjoy reading the results and methods of testing in the magazine and then use CHOICE Online as an ongoing point of reference.

What CHOICE campaigns have you found to be most important to you? Is there an area you would like to see us campaign in?

The energy-saving and testing assessment campaigns have been most important to me. I would also like CHOICE to consider a campaign regarding Australian product warranties versus the far superior warranties offered by American manufacturers.

What would you like to see CHOICE put to the test?

I would like to see more children's computer programs and games tested for value and suitability. I would also like more regular updates on smartphones and tablets with an emphasis on performance, for example phone reception and processing speed.

Tell us about your CHOICE experiences and become our next Member in the Spotlight! Send us an email at inthespotlight@choice.com.au.

Have your say

Did you know that at least 62 Australians – mostly in their 60s to 90s – have died from mobility scooter collisions or falls?

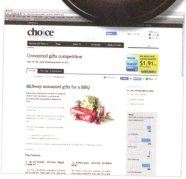
To find out more about how and why Australians are increasingly using mobility scooters, CHOICE is working on a project with a number of other stakeholders, including the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, to conduct a national survey of mobility scooter users.

If you or one of your family members uses a mobility scooter, please help us by completing the survey online at productsafety.gov.au/mobilityscooters from 9 February. If you don't have access to the internet, you can request a copy be mailed to you by calling the ACCC on 1300 302 502.

Unwanted gifts

choice PROMOTIONS

The CHOICE Unwanted Christmas Gift Promotion featured in our December/January 2012 issue and we've had a tremendous response. Thank you to everyone for sending in some very entertaining entries. Check out our Most Unwanted Christmas Gift winner at choice.com.au/unwantedgift.



Going green!

CHOICE's Going Green Campaign has started, and many of you will be receiving more information from us this year via electronic media. However, there is still a large number of CHOICE subscribers who haven't supplied us with an email address and mobile number. Please help us reduce paper waste by emailing us at goinggreen@choice.com.au. If you can't remember whether we have your details on record, email us anyway or call us on 1800 069 552 and we'll update your details on the spot.

GOING GREEN

FIRST LOOK

Full of hot air

Many items in today's wash – shoes, gloves, hats, specialist sportswear, woollens – aren't suitable for tumble dryers. This is where the Asko Drying Cabinet comes in. It circulates cold, warm or hot air to evaporate moisture in clothes, in much the same way as line drying. It claims to be equivalent to 16m of line length and able to dry everything from linen to boots in less than two hours.

The cabinet is expensive and won't suit all laundry situations. It's tall, at 1.7m, meaning it needs to be fastened to a wall to prevent toppling, and requires ducting or a well-ventilated area to operate properly. It features sensor drying with three dryness levels, timed drying, cold dry (no heat), delay start, time-to-go display and even a towel-warming function.

It also takes some practice to load. The pull-out racks are a good feature, but internal space constraints mean larger items such as sheets and towels need folding, taking longer to dry. They can also hang over on to lower racks, further limiting drying space.

Drying is via natural convection, where heated air is forced down the middle of the cabinet to the base and rises up the sides again, so you'll also need to maintain airflow throughout the cabinet to ensure optimum performance. Larger items are loaded on the sides and smaller items in the middle. With some trial and error, we managed to fit in about 4.5kg of washing.

Asko claims energy savings over conventional dryers, but each of our drying runs in the cabinet produced mediocre drying performance. When running any of the auto programs, the load required further time to dry sufficiently. Energy use and running times were comparable to small conventional electric vented dryers.

CHOICE VERDICT

This is an expensive option for drying your clothes or other items, given there aren't significant time or energy savings to be made. It may be useful for people living in very wet or cold regions, or those with limited external space where outdoor drying is impractical. It might also appeal to keen surfers or skiers, who can use it as a wardrobe for their seldom-dry attire.

GRAHAM BYRNE

ASKO DRYING CABINET DC7573
PRICE $1999
CONTACT www.asko.com.au

★★☆☆☆

ASKO

Wake-up call

The Productivity Commission's retail sector report delivered late last year wasn't what retailers were hoping for. Not only did it sidestep the industry's demand that the GST exemption be revoked for overseas online purchases under $1000, it also said the government should ensure those purchases get to consumers more efficiently. The report urged the government to set up a taskforce to investigate "new approaches to the processing of low value imported parcels, particularly those in the international mail stream" in order to improve efficiency in handling.

Other PC recommendations are in line with CHOICE's submission to the inquiry, including re-examining parallel import restrictions.

ANDY KOLLMORGEN

Life on the lines

The National Health and Medical Research Council has released new Australian Dietary Guidelines for public consultation. The guidelines emphasise eating more vegetables but less starchy vegetables such as potatoes. And while men should reduce their red meat intake, young women need to eat more of it.

The guidelines are also tougher on junk food, recommending that people who don't exercise avoid it. There are guidelines for infants from seven months of age, and a draft Australian Guide to Healthy Eating based on the guidelines has also been released.

ANGELA McDOUGALL

Cash for containers

The Northern Territory government has joined South Australia in implementing container deposit legislation (CDL), which will see 10c refunded per bottle, can or carton deposited at collection depots. The move comes as part of the territory's Climate Change Policy, aimed at reducing street litter, increasing recycling and reducing recyclable goods entering landfill by 50%.

The move comes despite the federal government's Packaging Impacts Consultation Regulatory Impact Statement released last December finding Australia's current packaging agreement is more cost-effective than CDL.

ELISE DALLEY

Highly charged

The UK government will ban excessive credit card surcharges following a super-complaint to the Office of Fair Trading in March 2011 by CHOICE's sister organisation Which?. The change will come into effect in the UK by the end of 2012. In a further win, the European Parliament will cap debit card surcharges across Europe from June 2014.

"These kinds of surcharges are out of control and it's good to see the UK super-complaint paying off," says CHOICE director of campaigns and communication Christopher Zinn. "We expect the RBA to follow through on plans to keep such surcharging fair and reasonable here." ZOYA SHEFTALOVICH

Group gripes

Australia's consumer regulators are commencing a new national project focusing on group-buying daily deal websites and businesses. The project has come about as a direct result of the spike in consumer complaints about these sites. Fair Trading NSW received almost 500 complaints since July 2011, and five of the top 10 companies complained about by NSW consumers are group-buying operations. KATE BROWNE

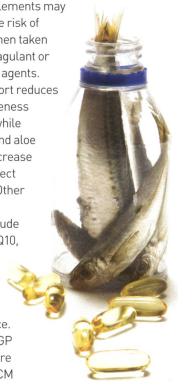
500
Number of complaints lodged

Bad medicine

A recent paper in the *Medical Journal of Australia* has pointed out potential dangers arising from interactions between prescription and complementary medicines (CM).

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a common cause of ill-health, disability and death in Australia, affecting more than three million adults. Many people with CVD take CM believing they're as safe or safer than prescription medicines. But fish oil, vitamin E, ginkgo, glucosamine and garlic supplements may increase the risk of bleeding when taken with anticoagulant or antiplatelet agents. St John's wort reduces the effectiveness of statins, while vitamin D and aloe vera can increase the toxic effect of digoxin. Other CMs to be wary of include coenzyme Q10, hawthorn, ginseng, capsicum, bilberry and liquorice.

Let your GP know if you're taking any CM products. KARINA BRAY



A mixed bag

The Australian and NZ food and health ministers' much-anticipated response to the independent Review of Food Labelling Law and Policy was a mixed bag for CHOICE's Better Food Labelling Campaign priorities. Ministers recognised the need to stamp out dodgy health claims and introduce effective front-of-pack nutrition information, but stopped short of endorsing traffic light labels. The response on free range labelling was also disappointing, with ministers leaving it to industry to come up with a definition . For our full response, visit choice.com.au/betterfoodlabelling. ANGELA McDOUGALL

➤ I SAY

Jetfail strikes again

My partner recently had to fly from Newcastle, NSW to the Gold Coast in Queensland. It all began going wrong when a traffic accident delayed our drive to the airport. She was flying with Jetstar, which closes its check in counter 30 minutes before departure (2:30pm in this case).

We arrived just in time (with a minute or two to spare, according to my watch) with carry-on luggage only. There was no line, but the three Jetstar employees were too busy chatting among themselves to notice us right away. By the time we were served, they told us was too late to check in. We then asked if there was a later flight, which was met with a curt "5:30pm".

Feeling somewhat shocked, we stepped away from the counter. As an afterthought, I turned back to ask where the departure display board was located, but the staff were already gone, apparently heading to lunch (at least, that's what we overheard as they walked past us on their way out).

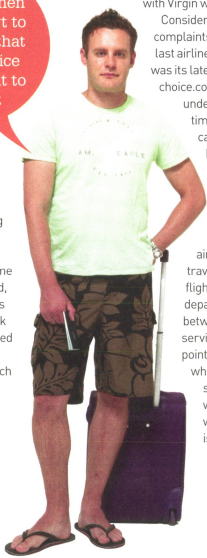
Customer service at an adjacent desk told us that Jetstar staff take their break in unison, after check-in closes. They said the best way to get a replacement ticket was online, where we discovered the 5:30pm Jetstar flight was booked out anyway. Only a single $380 one-way ticket with Virgin was left, which we bought.

Considering one of the biggest complaints about Jetstar in our last airline satisfaction survey was its late-arriving flights (see choice.com.au/domesticair), it is understandable their check-in time is rigid. However, in this case Jetstar's inattentive help desk and lack of common sense was the real problem, as we've highlighted before (see *CHOICE*, July 2011).

Being a regional airport, we watched travellers board the original flight five minutes before departure. The difference between good service and bad service was very clear at that point. It's easy to please people when things are running smoothly, but it's only when things starts to go wrong that good service is really put to the test.

BRENDAN MAYS

It's only when things start to go wrong that good service is really put to the test



ISTOCK PHOTO

Planning a trip? Turn to page 16 for our story on online flight booking traps

Gardasil for all

Australian teenage boys are likely to be offered subsidised vaccinations against human papillomavirus (HPV) from next year, following the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee (PBAC)'s recommendation to expand use of the vaccine beyond young women. PBAC recommends the Gardasil vaccine be given to boys aged 12 and 13 in a school-based program, and suggests a catch-up scheme over two years for year 9 students.

Gardasil helps protect women against genital warts and cervical cancer caused by HPV, and can prevent genital warts as well as anal and penile cancer in males. It's been available free to 12- and 13-year-old girls since 2007.

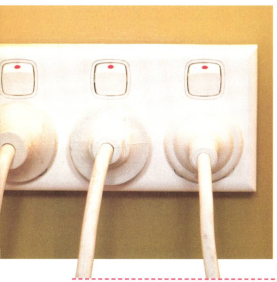
RACHEL CLEMONS

Get social...

Join us on Facebook and Twitter for fun competitions and updates on the products we're testing.

Your Say

We want to hear from you. If your experience is not good, then you can help other CHOICE members avoid scams and rip-offs. If you've had a great response to a complaint you've taken to a manufacturer or retailer, our members want to know about that too! Email us at yoursay@choice.com.au or write to Your Say, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville, NSW 2204. Letters may be edited for length and clarity.



Risky power play

Your article on child safety devices (*CHOICE*, November 2011) was a really good read, especially now that our children have given us nine grandchildren (five months to 13 years).

However, the tip about hiding power cords behind furniture and under rugs caused me concern for a couple of reasons. If power cords are behind furniture that is very close to the wall where a child cannot crawl or hide, fine. But we all know children love to play hide and seek, and behind lounges or chairs is a great hiding spot – and kids will touch and play with anything found there.

Latch on to safety

My other concern is covering power cords with a rug. If the cord has a small fault inside the flex, it may overheat and catch fire. Some years ago a business associate and his wife had

LETTER OF THE MONTH

A gift that soon stops giving

Last year, four friends and I decided to buy each other birthday gift vouchers for day spa treatments at an upmarket hotel. We bought five vouchers totalling $1330 at separate times during the year, hoping to all go together in one group, only to realise in October, when we bought the last voucher, that those purchased in January, February and March had expired (they were valid for six months).

After speaking with the day spa desk staff, manager and director, and finally writing to the managing director of the hotel, we were offered a refund of the final voucher ($350) and were told the March voucher ($210) could be redeemed. The three other vouchers, however, were deemed too old. They offered a discount of 20% to three guests if we still wished to visit the spa at a future date (at an additional cost). We did not take up this offer and remain out of pocket to the tune of $770.

Lina Ilic, Earlwood, NSW

CHOICE SAYS *Since we first reported on gift cards that quickly stop giving (*CHOICE*, December 2010/January 2011), consumers have continued to contact us with stories of cashed-up plastic that has ended up worthless.*

The federal government has since taken steps to deal with these problems. In an issues paper released in December, the Commonwealth Consumer Affairs Advisory Council laid out the problems with gift cards and invited consumers to help determine how the issues should be addressed. You can send submissions to CCAAC@treasury.gov.au – reference CCAAC Gift Card Review – by Friday, 2 March 2012.

Lina tells us that after being contacted by CHOICE, the hotel fully refunded all the vouchers. Lina and her friends are using the money towards a trip to Melbourne.

their business premises and attached residence destroyed by fire. Sure enough, the cause of the fire was traced to a cord that had been covered by a rug.

Geoff Hoyle, Kaleen, ACT

CHOICE SAYS *Placing power cords behind furniture is not ideal if the space is accessible to young children or if the furniture can press against and damage the cord. Likewise, only power cords in good condition should be put under rugs, for the reasons you mention. And we wouldn't recommend this option if the cord is in frequent use (leading to possible heating problems and fire risk) or for heavy traffic areas where the cord may suffer damage over time.*

Even better is to run the cord around the walls of the room, but that's not always feasible. In fact, power cords that aren't in good condition shouldn't be used at all, but admittedly it's not always obvious when that's the case. Check for any damage to the cord's outer coating – if you can see the internal wires at any point, it's time to repair or replace the cord.

Consider taping the cord to the floor to prevent it becoming a tripping hazard or your child picking it up. Cord shorteners, which wind up the excess cord into a compact plastic compartment, can also be handy for tidying up cords from lamps or other appliances. Normally, coiling a live power cord isn't recommended as the cord can overheat and cause a fire. However, these cord shorteners are designed to wind only short lengths of small appliance cords and should be safe in normal use. Check the instructions before using.

Software lost in the void

In June last year I paid $79.99 by credit card for my annual antivirus software subscription to be renewed. Instead of this happening, I was asked by email to pay for another subscription, without any suggestion that the payment I'd already made might be refunded or applied to a new subscription.

I have spent hours on the phone speaking to people from the company. I've also emailed countless case managers innumerable times. I've spoken to my credit card company to obtain details of the payment and confirm it was sent, as well as sent details of contact names and phone numbers of people from my credit card company to the antivirus software company so that the payment can be traced.

I can't think of anything else I can do to assist this company solve the mystery of where they have put my subscription money. And I still haven't received a renewal of my subscription or a refund of the money paid.

William Kierath, Bathurst, NSW

CHOICE SAYS *Customers who buy goods with a credit, charge or debit card are generally better protected than those who pay by cash – if you've paid for goods in full and haven't received them, you may have a case for chargeback.*

Time limits for chargeback apply and may vary between financial institutions, so it's important to contact your bank or credit union as soon as possible. In this case, since William has already spoken to his bank in his attempts to solve the problem, they may grant him an extension of the time limit if needed. It's also a good idea to make the request in writing. The credit card company can then investigate and will likely refund the amount paid given the circumstances.

William has since let us know that having investigated this case, his credit card company refunded the payment.

Thumbs

I purchased a Scanpan non-stick griddle about two years ago. The non-stick coating recently began to come unstuck. I contacted Sheldon & Hammond, the Australian distributor of Scanpan, and they provided me with a reply-paid address to return it to. Within three days I received a new griddle, no charge, no questions asked.

Cecelia Cuttler, Nowra Hill, NSW

I bought a Samsung fridge from Appliances Online and noticed a dent on the edge of the freezer door after delivery. I mentioned this in a feedback form to www.feefo.com, which conducts independent reviews on behalf of online merchants. An Appliances Online representative contacted me and authorised a $50 refund. With that kind of service I'll continue to shop with them.

Ken Yap, Lane Cove, NSW

I recently misread the section of my car's handbook that deals with tyre wear. Figuring I needed a new set of tyres, I phoned around and was offered a good deal by Tyrepower in Darwin. The manager looked at the tyres and wondered why I wanted to replace them. "Plenty of wear left on those," he reckoned. He could have sold me new ones and I'd have been none the wiser.

Anthony Austin, Palmerston, NT

Air tariff control

Zoya Sheftalovich exposes the website traps and surcharges that can blow out the cost of that bargain basement airfare.

Booking your next domestic flight online would seem to be a convenient way to secure cheap travel deals – after all, online booking systems appear designed to make accessing air travel easier and cheaper. However, if you're not careful, that bargain basement fare may cost more than you expect. Many airlines bombard you with lengthy forms, often prefilled to include unnecessary optional extras. CHOICE shows you which sites to be wary of and how to avoid paying for options you don't need.

PLAYING IT SAFE

Travel insurance can be important for overseas and domestic travel (see choice.com.au/travelinsurance). Regardless of their questionable opting in and out policies, you should work out whether the cover provided by the airlines is right for you, or whether you should look elsewhere. It's worth checking your options before you commit – after all, the one-size-fits-all policies that some airlines offer may not cover you for pre-existing issues, if you're over a certain age or in other circumstances. Always read the product disclosure statement before buying any travel insurance. Check with your credit card provider – you may be covered if you pay with your card. To find out which ones offer the best travel insurance see *CHOICE* (Dec 2011/Jan 2012) or visit choice.com.au/creditcardtravelinsurance.

63.7%
The percentage of web-surfing Australians who browsed travel sites in October 2011

529,350
The number of minutes Australians spent on travel sites during that month

50 min
The average time spent by each visitor on travel websites over that month

Source: Nielsen Online Ratings

Boarding Pass

Jetstar

Jetstar's online booking system is inconsistent. Consumers must opt in to agree to terms and conditions, prepaid parking and SMS itineraries, but opt out of loyalty club membership, seat selection and checked baggage – so make sure you click the right box if you've only got carry-on luggage. Pop-ups are also annoying.

CHOICE staff member Linda Magee recently booked a family trip with Jetstar. While the fare seemed cheap at first, she was shocked to find a number of extras she hadn't realised she'd opted in for had been tacked on to the end of her bill.

"I selected seats without realising they would cost extra," she says. "It doesn't look like you have to pay something on top of the fare when you go through the steps, so I couldn't believe it when I saw it on the bill at the end. By the time I realised what had happened, I'd wasted so much time on the booking process that I didn't really have time to start again."

But this was just the beginning; Linda was then stung by a $60 credit card payment fee. "I don't have a Jetstar credit card, but I didn't realise that it would cost me that much more to pay with my regular card. I paid up, but I won't be flying with them again."

A spokesperson told CHOICE: "Jetstar clearly discloses any charges and provides customers the choice to customise or remove any offering. We disclose this fee and fee-free payment options so there are no surprises."

Virgin australia

While most of Virgin Australia's booking system is straightforward, there is some trickiness. The box to opt in to Velocity Rewards, Virgin's frequent flyer program, looks an awful lot like the terms and conditions box.

Inconsistently, customers must select whether they agree with terms and conditions, wish to check baggage, offset their carbon footprint or pay for extras such as seat selection, yet travel insurance is automatically selected, so you have to specifically opt out if you don't want it. CHOICE member Kym Vercoe alerted us to this practice.

Virgin spokesperson Melissa Thomson says customers who buy travel insurance without meaning to can cancel their policies. Virgin even sends customers an email informing them of their purchase and allowing them to reverse it after an online booking is completed. "We're fully supportive of travel insurance and thoroughly recommend it to all of our guests. But if they wish to, they have 14 days to cancel the travel insurance."

tigerairways.com

If you're not careful with Tiger's online booking system, you may be paying for extras you neither want nor need. Users opt in for terms and conditions and the carriage of sports equipment, but opt out of checked baggage. "The booking options available on Tiger's website are based on customer demand," says spokesperson Vanessa Regan.

Interestingly, sometimes during our testing we had to opt out of travel insurance, while other times buying travel insurance required going to a separate site. A pop-up advertising the option to switch to flexible ticketing, which allows flight changes but is very pricey, also interrupts the booking flow.

Regan says consumers need to be aware of the options they're selecting in the booking process. "We encourage people to select carefully to ensure they tailor their travel needs correctly at the time of booking."

rex. Regional Express

Rex, the airline servicing Australia's rural flyers, can also be tricky to navigate. Consumers opt in to receive their itinerary via SMS and for additional services such as transporting unaccompanied minors. But if you're in a rush, you may not notice you must opt out of buying travel insurance. As with all policies, customers can cancel their purchase within 14 days, but this is a trap to watch out for.

QANTAS

Although Qantas has recently taken a blow to its reputation, the national carrier's online booking system is the most transparent and easiest to navigate. Consumers have to select whether they accept terms and conditions, want to purchase travel insurance or carbon offsets or receive emailed flight specials or have their flight details remembered by the website for next time.

The share market

Neighbourhoods across the nation are swapping, sharing and renting their way to a better future, writes **Brendan Mays**.

Sometimes buying new doesn't make sense, especially when you can get what you need for next to nothing and give it back when you're done. Whether it's a car, chainsaw or even a chicken, someone out there is likely to have one handy.

Community sharing is growing in popularity to meet today's consumer demands. It's energy-efficient, environmentally friendly and cost-effective – and, thanks to the internet, it's now easier than ever.

Food

Food is one of our biggest expenses, especially if you're after sustainable, chemical-free produce. Biological Farmers of Australia reports that we now spend about a billion dollars each year on organic food alone.

For these reasons and more, many Australians are rethinking the humble veggie garden and, with the help of resource-sharing websites (see opposite), savvy local groups are organising to grow together, swap, share or give away their extra home-grown food. It's fresh, organic and efficient, and it can save you heaps.

In other countries such as the US, people are even buying into goat-sharing schemes. These give you part ownership of a goat to access its fresh produce such as milk and cheese. Closer to home, at least one national operator allows keen backyard farmers to rent a chook, which is basically a try-before-you-buy chicken service.

Interested would-be urban farmers will find an enormous amount of information online, even if you only have a small space to use or no previous experience. There are also a number of shared community gardens and neighbourhood groups offering food co-ops, which can also be found online.

And it doesn't stop with produce. Closeted pastry chefs can even join Mamabake and get together to bake and share tasty goodies.

Tools & household items

Increasing growth in urban centres is another factor in the rise of community sharing. According to the Department of Infrastructure and Transport (DIT), our population has grown by three million people over the past decade, mostly in major cities. Greater urban density and fewer people per household means fewer garden sheds and reduced opportunities to borrow. And asking a neighbour to lend something is not always a feasible option.

Activate!

Active travel such as cycling or walking is good for your health and the planet. Car share schemes save on resources and may be able to save you money. Using public transport or active travel reduces stress on infrastructure and can reduce travel times.

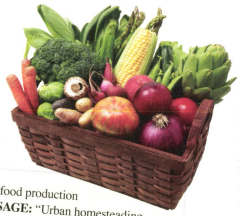
Why buy?

Researching and buying a product can be time- and cash-consuming. If you only need to use something for a short time, renting can save you money. It's also eco-friendly as it saves on shipping, packaging and other associated costs.

Food with benefits

Growing and sharing food can save you hundreds every year at the checkout. You will produce fewer emissions thanks to reduced or minimal transport costs, and composting can reduce household waste. You can also enjoy fresh, delicious food grown without harsh chemicals.

ISTOCKPHOTO



Fortunately, websites such as Rentoid.com and OpenShed.com.au allow you to rent anything from drills to drum kits and anything else you can imagine. Owners set the rental price, bond, terms and conditions of renting, and the potential renter can decide whether it is worthwhile.

Urban homesteading *verb* The practice of food production and storage in a suburban or city residence. **USAGE:** "Urban homesteading is a great way to be more environmentally conscious."

Transaction cost *noun* The total cost of engaging in a market. The price of a bicycle might be $100, but other transaction costs include time, health and maintenance costs. **USAGE:** "Even though my bike cost a lot of money, I included improving my health and avoiding traffic in the transaction cost."

As with borrowing from your neighbour, there is some risk involved but taking precautions can minimise problems. "People renting items set their expectations when they put up a listing," says Lisa Fox, director and co-founder of OpenShed.com.au. "We encourage people to check out member profiles, ratings and feedback, and we provide a secret digital code that ensures no money changes hands until both parties are happy."

Users of the OpenShed website can organise to meet in a public place if they don't want people coming to their home, but the site is designed with community spirit in mind. "Our members don't treat each other like big businesses," says Fox. "We think it's a good way for communities to get organised and share the things they need for a fair price."

If renting isn't your thing, however, you could use one of many websites to swap or even pick up the things you need for free. See Share Register (right) for more.

Transport

Population growth also places a strain on our transport system. The DIT reports that if current trends continue, the cost of congestion could rise from $9.5 billion in 2005 to $20.4 billion in 2020. There are also environmental concerns and quality of life issues.

One of the easiest solutions to our travel troubles is making cycling and walking a more attractive mode of commuting. Estimates suggest that even five per cent more commuters using "active" modes of transport could reduce 2020 estimates by more than $6 billion.

In London, the Barclays Cycle Hire scheme has resulted in almost nine million bicycle trips since its inception in December 2010. In other parts of Europe, hop-on-hop-off community bicycles are part of everyday life. Australian governments and councils are investing hundreds of millions into cycleways and other initiatives and although local schemes have been slow to take off, evidence suggests increasing numbers of cyclists on the road. One council even offers a bike library where you can borrow a regular or cargo bike.

However, cycling is not for everybody, and a car is often a necessity, especially for those outside urban centres. One way that communities can help pool resources is to use vehicle-sharing schemes. Businesses such as GoGet and Flexicar may prove useful to some, otherwise you could try private car rentals organised through websites such as DriveMyCar.com.au. Just make sure to assess your driving patterns before making a commitment to ensure you get a good deal. ■

Share register

Food

Australian City Farms & Community Gardens – communitygarden.org.au

Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies – ceres.org.au

Landshare – landshareaustralia.com.au

Mamalooke – mamalooke.com

Rentachook – rentachook.com.au

Transport

Drive My Car – drivemycarrentals.com.au

Flexicar – flexicar.com.au

GoGet – goget.com.au

Green Share Car – charterdrive.com.au

Other items

Freecycle – freecycle.org

Gumtree – gumtree.com.au

The Sharehood – thesharehood.org

Open Shed – openshed.com.au

Rentoid – rentoid.com

Zilch – zilch.com

Love just a click away?

With Valentine's Day around the corner, **Zoya Sheftalovich** and **Elise Dalley** compare four popular online dating sites.

The online dating industry offers a range of services for those looking for love, casual encounters or even extramarital affairs, and millions of Australians are now using the internet to find their next partner. But not everything is roses and chocolates.

The ACCC has been investigating online scammers who use dating sites as a feeding ground. And NSW Fair Trading is looking into reports of poor service, a lack of access to refunds and rules on cancellations in the industry. In the 2010/11 financial year, NSW Fair Trading reviewed the terms and conditions of 24 online dating sites. A spokesperson says they'll continue to look into the industry this year.

CHOICE checked out the offerings of some of the market leaders, including doyen RSVP, relative newcomer eHarmony, free service Oasis Active and up-and-coming US-based site OkCupid. We found some privacy policies and terms and conditions, all agreed to by users with just the click of a mouse, are riddled with disturbing provisions.

rsvp

Australian members
Two million – the most popular online dating site according to recent figures.
Who's on it Roughly 50/50 female and male, with 48% of members aged between 26 and 40 and 34% between 41 and 60.

Cost It's free to become a member of RSVP, view profiles and see the last four people who have viewed your profile, and to send and accept virtual kisses, which are expressions of interest. Users need to buy stamps to email others, which expire within one to 12 months and cost between $4.59 and $11.69 each, depending on quantity bought and expiry period. A stamp allows unlimited free contact for 30 days between two members.

RSVP also has two premium membership services, RSViP Priority (from $6.65 to $14.90 per month, depending on length of membership) and RSViP Private (from $8.32 to $24.90 per month). Both allow members to access

Don't give your heart to a scammer

Online dating can cost a lot more than a broken heart. The ACCC estimates Australians lose millions every year in online dating and romance scams that can easily operate on legitimate websites. Popular scams include convincing users to part with their personal details or money, which is often sent overseas and is unrecoverable.

One CHOICE member believes she stumbled on such a scam when using RSVP. "I was married for 33 years when my husband died," says Alice*. "A friend suggested going on to dating sites to meet someone. My instinct told me to be careful so I set up a fake email address.

"The very first person who contacted me was a scammer. I complained to the site about him, and six weeks later they told me that they had removed all of his profiles from their site. So I moved to eHarmony, and guess who I found there?"

NSW Fair Trading is looking into reports of poor service, a lack of access to refunds and rules on cancellations in the industry

compatibility scores and reports, see all members who have viewed their profile in the past 21 days and have non-expiring stamps and more emailing options. Priority members are also highlighted and appear at the top of search results, while private members have the option to keep hidden until they choose to allow others to view their profile.

Approach Free users enter the gender, age range and location of those they're looking for and can view the results immediately, but don't get any hints as to whether they are compatible. Paid members get access to compatibility data, and so may have a better shot at a good match.

Privacy Signing up to an RSVP account and agreeing to its privacy terms and conditions in effect grants permission for your personal information, including photos and email addresses, to be used for "any purpose", which may include advertising or transmission to a third party. While all sites we looked at track your activities using cookies, RSVP even shows other users how often you're on the site and who you're looking at.

Experiences "I met my current partner there," says Mary*. "We've been together about four-and-a-half years, have a two-year-old daughter and are getting married next year."

eHarmony

Australian members More than a million, according to an eHarmony spokesperson.

Who's on it About 51% males and 49% females, with most members aged in their 20s and 30s but also with a large number of older users.

Cost There are three levels of membership. Users can create a free account to receive a personal profile, view daily matches and have limited interaction with their matches, such as sending a smile or a limited number of set questions.

Basic paid members are charged from $19.95 a month for a 12-month membership to $59.95 month for a one-month membership. They can request and view photos of matches, see who has viewed their profile and when their matches last logged in, and communicate with confirmed matches. Total Connect members pay from $23.95 a month for 12 months to $39.95 per month for three months. They get all basic plan features plus are able to phone their matches without revealing their phone number via a service called Secure Call. They also get a deeper personality analysis.

$1m
Estimated advertising spend in November 2011 by eHarmony, RSVP and Oasis Active**

2 hrs, 15 mins, 25 secs
Average time spent by users on the Oasis Active website in November 2011**

Approach eHarmony's selling point is its tailored approach to finding love online. New users fill out a detailed questionnaire in which they rate their own appearance and personality as well as nominate important features in a relationship and partner. The answers form their personality profile, which is then used to find matches using the so-called "29 dimensions of compatibility".

Privacy By posting information and photos on a profile page or any public area of the eHarmony website, users

*NOT THEIR REAL NAMES
**ONLINE DATING RATINGS

automatically agree to have that information perpetually owned and used by eHarmony for such purposes as advertising. Users' contact details may be shared with third parties for advertising, but opting out is possible by changing certain settings or notifying eHarmony of your request in writing.
Experiences Jane* says: "eHarmony doesn't [let you join] if you're separated but not divorced and doesn't seem to make it so easy to chat. And no-one seems to have a current photo of themselves!"

Australian members About 1.6 million.
Cost Free.
Who's on it Roughly 60% of members are male and 40% female; 64% are aged between 18 and 35, while 27% are between 36 and 50.
Approach Signed-up users describe their personality, interests and hobbies and select criteria for their ideal partner. They can then search for suitable matches. A spokesperson says all profiles and pictures are manually checked to ensure information provided is accurate.
Privacy By signing up, users agree that all profile information including photos is public and so automatically grant an irrevocable and ongoing licence for the company to use and distribute any information posted or transmitted on the site. In effect, this means user photos, aliases and other personal details can be used in advertising, online and off, though it's possible to opt out of this by updating privacy options in the account settings portal on the website. Email addresses, photos and information may also be shared with third parties for marketing purposes on behalf of Oasis Active.
Experiences "The matching criteria isn't very specific – it only has the kilometres' distance, the language spoken, the status (relationship, casual dating, friendship) and age range," says Lana*. "I'd like it to also include some more or all of the information keyed into the details section. One big advantage is that it's a free site and so there are lots of people there."

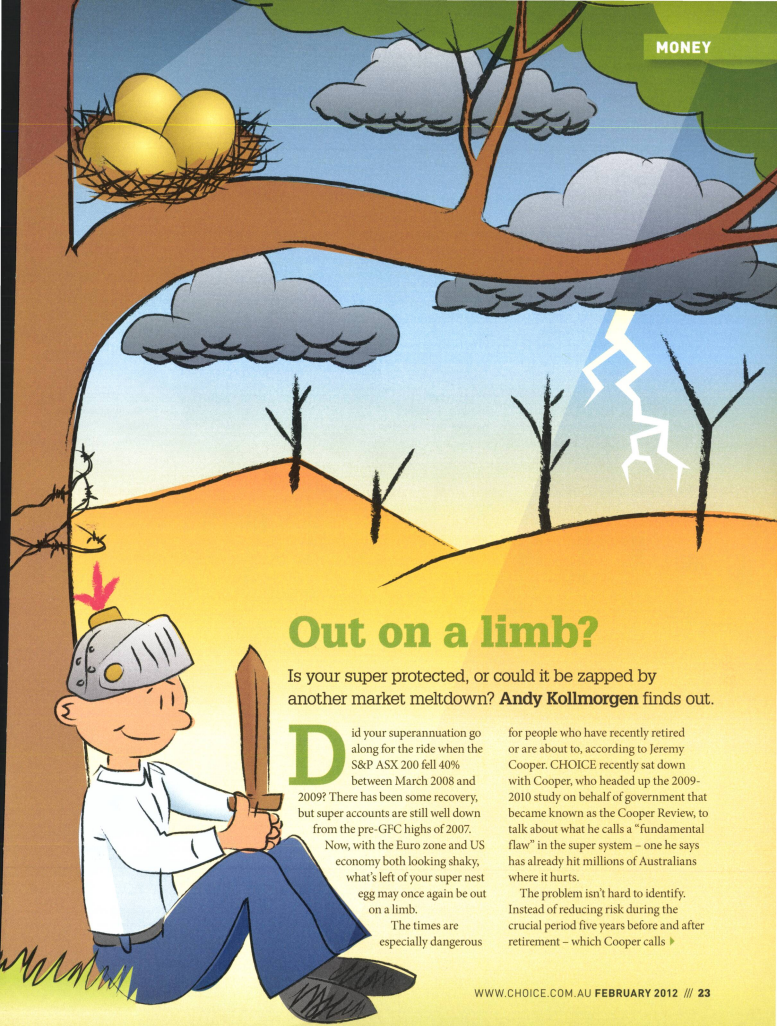
8000
Number of marriages RSVP claims to have spawned in 15 years of operation

Australian members Figures not available.
Cost There are two levels of membership. Free users can look at profiles and photos and contact other members. For $9.95 per month, A-list members can access the site ad-free, change their user name, get additional match and photo album options and have more space and options in their messaging inbox as well as better anonymity settings.
Approach OkCupid claims to use a maths-based matching system to help users find partners. After completing a basic profile, users can elect to fill out hundreds of optional broad-reaching questions such as if they'd date a messy person, whether they like dogs, or even how often they brush their teeth. Potential matches are then rated based on a percentage for being a match, a friend or an enemy. Users can then flick through quick matches or browse all potential matches based on search criteria including gender, age and distance.
Privacy OkCupid may use contact information for advertising purposes and compiling its OkTrends blog, which tracks and charts user behaviour. They may also share this information with third parties. Users can request not to receive some advertising material. OkCupid allows information posted on its site to appear in search engine results.
Experiences "I think the criteria and the matching side of things on OkCupid were pretty good, although it still didn't predict the 'spark' when two people meet," says Catherine, who met her husband on OkCupid. "Several guys I went on dates with had high scores (80%+), and although we had similar interests we didn't connect at all in terms of conversation. Or, we did connect but they were only interested in sex." ■

Safer online dating

- **Create a separate email** address for online dating.
- **Never transfer money** or give out your credit card or bank account details to someone you've met online.
- **Be cautious** about how much personal information you share – scammers can use it to create fake identities.
- **Report a suspected scam** to your local fair trading organisation. For a list of these, go to choice.com.au/fairtrading.

*NOT THEIR REAL NAMES



Out on a limb?

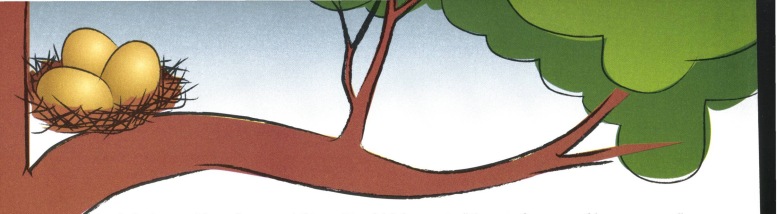
Is your super protected, or could it be zapped by another market meltdown? **Andy Kollmorgen** finds out.

Did your superannuation go along for the ride when the S&P ASX 200 fell 40% between March 2008 and 2009? There has been some recovery, but super accounts are still well down from the pre-GFC highs of 2007.

Now, with the Euro zone and US economy both looking shaky, what's left of your super nest egg may once again be out on a limb.

The times are especially dangerous for people who have recently retired or are about to, according to Jeremy Cooper. CHOICE recently sat down with Cooper, who headed up the 2009-2010 study on behalf of government that became known as the Cooper Review, to talk about what he calls a "fundamental flaw" in the super system – one he says has already hit millions of Australians where it hurts.

The problem isn't hard to identify. Instead of reducing risk during the crucial period five years before and after retirement – which Cooper calls ▸



the "retirement risk zone" – most super accounts remain overly exposed to fickle share markets. "If we go over a cliff like we did during the GFC, there's nothing much people can do," he says.

The portfolio imbalance across the retirement risk zone – when the investment strategy should be defensive rather than accumulative – is "a piece of unfinished business" that has yet to be addressed by the super industry. Cooper argues that having close to 70% of your assets tied to share market movements when you're looking to retire makes older Australians uniquely vulnerable to financial calamity.

The super system has not served Australians well lately. According to numbers released in July last year by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Australian super funds were the third-worst performing retirement funds among the more than 30 member countries from 2008 to 2010 – only Portugal and Estonia did worse. Global consulting firm Towers Watson also pointed out in July last year that very few Australian super funds significantly reduce exposure to the share markets while shifting from accumulation to the drawdown/pension phase, with the average proportion invested in equities dropping from about 74% to 67%. And it turns out our super funds have the highest exposure to share markets among all OECD countries.

To be fair, keeping accounts in accumulation mode right up to retirement has seemed like a good idea given the overall gains in the markets from the early 1980s up until the arrival of the GFC in late 2007.

But Cooper says the thinking has not kept pace with the shifting realities of global economics. "The problem is systemic, and the industry's really caught in the headlights on this one. More than any other country in the world, we have forced risk on our retirees and near-retirees."

Case in point

Exhibit A for Cooper is one of Australia's most popular types of post-retirement product, the account-based pension plans into which many super accounts are rolled. Drawdown requirements mean account holders must withdraw a certain amount every year to stay compliant with government rules, but for the past five years in a row Canberra has stepped in to decrease the amount because retirees have been faced with the prospect of selling assets worth a lot less than when they were purchased. According to Cooper, it's an all-too-familiar phenomenon.

Locking in losses also happens when you switch to a safer portfolio too late. "You're just cementing your problems if you switch the balance of your account to fixed-interest products once the losses have been realised," says Cooper. Not only has your account's earning power been hobbled, but retirees are using up four or five per cent of the account annually, usually without any money coming in. "The sort of returns you would need just can't be realised." But those in the retirement risk zone don't have the luxury of waiting it out.

120%

The amount of income Australians aged 59 in 2009 needed to contribute to their super to make up for GFC losses by age 60

$160 billion

The drop in total Australian superannuation fund assets between December 2007 and June 2009

$1.08 trillion

Assets held in Australian superannuation funds as of June 2009

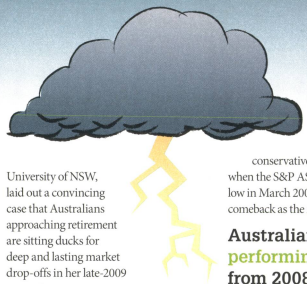
With the world economy looking more treacherous than ever, Cooper maintains that baby boomers should look at trading the hope of recovery for the certainty of fixed-income products.

How bad was it?

The Australian economy held up far better through the GFC than economies of other developed countries, but at the height of the crisis shareholders in Australia were hurt as badly as shareholders in places such as the US, UK, Japan, Germany and France.

The impact on super accounts during the GFC depended on how exposed they were to the share markets. According to an analysis by super industry research firm Chant West, the median loss for what are generally referred to as "balanced" funds – the asset allocation for most default funds – was 17.5% between March 2008 and 2009.

Cooper is not alone in sounding a warning. Associate Professor Hazel Bateman, who directs the Centre for Pensions and Superannuation at the



University of NSW, laid out a convincing case that Australians approaching retirement are sitting ducks for deep and lasting market drop-offs in her late-2009 paper, *Retirement Incomes in Australia in the Wake of the Global Financial Crisis*. She said workers aged between 30 and 40 would need to save as much as two per cent extra every year until retirement to make up for the losses that occurred between 2007 and 2009. But these generation Xers have time to increase their incomes and rethink expenses. According to Bateman, baby boomers are in a much tighter spot and need to either "increase their contribution rate or delay retirement to make up for their losses".

The needed increase would be substantial. "A retirement saver aged 49 before the crisis would need to contribute almost 19% of earnings each year, or more than double the mandatory rate, between the ages of 51 and 60 to catch up. If you were 55 you would need to contribute about 34% of earnings each year between the ages of 57 and 60 to catch up."

However, at least one major fund manager has warned against reacting after the markets have moved. Australian Super members who switched to more conservative investment options when the S&P ASX 300 hit a 60-year low in March 2009 missed out on the comeback as the markets recovered and rose about 35% by mid-June, according to an analysis by the company. But older Australians would have done better had they avoided the loss in the first place.

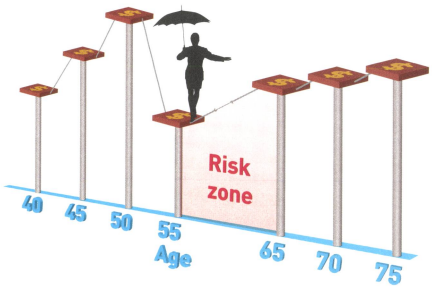
Australian super funds were the third-worst performing retirement funds in the OECD from 2008 to 2010

The fix

Cooper's message is that Australians in the retirement risk zone should move more assets into investments that return, say, six per cent a year instead of the eight or nine per cent the share markets can offer when times are good. This means reallocating toward fixed-interest products such as bonds or term deposits. But switching may not be easy. "When you're in a fund you're more or less beholden to what the fund manager is doing," Cooper says. He recommends talking to a trusted financial adviser.

Cooper is currently chairman of the retirement income division of Challenger, an investment management firm specialising in "guaranteed return products". The firm ran a marketing campaign late last year promising to future-proof retirement accounts by shifting allocations away from shares in favour of annuities. It mainly targeted self-managed super accounts and retirees, but Cooper says it's always a good time to protect your assets, especially if share markets appear to be on the brink of meltdown.

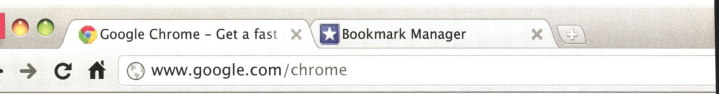
Cooper maintains that super fund members of any age can benefit from parking their money in safer havens during risky times, but such a move requires a hands-on approach. At a minimum, review the level of risk in your account and discuss safer options with your fund manager, whether or not you decide it's time to reduce risk. ■



HOPES FOR MYSUPER

Jeremy Cooper sees the potential for positive change in the Australian superannuation system with the introduction of new MySuper accounts in July next year. If the default accounts are designed as they should be, he says "you will be automatically de-risked when you reach the retirement risk zone".

But the prospect of upheaval in the super industry remains iffy. It's a gargantuan beast that's mightily resistant to change, Cooper maintains, and government can't press any magic buttons. "There's going to have to be some profound rethinking of a system that's remained virtually unchanged in its approach to risk since its inception." Despite the lessons of the GFC, taking a more conservative investment position at any life stage goes against the grain of conventional wisdom in the super industry, Cooper says. "The whole crowd of professional opinion would be against it."



Searching for answers

Do You Feel Lucky?

The internet is a world of information, and we rely on search engines to navigate it. But do these free services come with a catch? **Zoya Sheftalovich** investigates.

With hundreds of billions of documents available online and internet usage on the increase, the ability to sort the reliable and relevant information from the unreliable and irrelevant using search engines has become big business. In a report prepared for Google Australia, Deloitte Access Economics estimates that the time saved just by Australian households searching accurately online is worth about $7 billion per year alone. But are we really getting results that best match our search queries?

The players

In Australia, more than 88% of searches are conducted using Google, with Bing and Yahoo! (which is "powered" by Bing) trailing behind with about four and two per cent share of the Australian market respectively.

Google, Bing and Yahoo! are not impartial search arbiters – they all have systems in place that filter the way we receive our search results. They're businesses and therefore operate to make a profit, driven in part by paid advertisers and by supporting their own product offerings. In some cases this is a good thing – it means you get what you want, quickly. But at what cost?

With Google taking the lion's share of the market, it is approaching a monopoly – and search is not its only business. Its other offerings include Google Maps, financial market aggregator Google Finance, the Google+ social media network, Microsoft Office rival Google Docs, the Chrome web browser, the Android operating system, email behemoth Gmail, photo-sharing site Picasa and video-sharing site YouTube, among many others. And, to provide users with instant answers to search queries along with results, Google draws on its suite of products. So if you search for an address in Google, chances are a Google Map image will be your top result.

88% The percentage of search queries conducted in Google in December 2011

4% The search queries conducted in Bing

2% The search queries conducted in Yahoo!

The power of appearing early in search results is significant. A study conducted by

The Australia Institute (TAI) in 2011 found that only 15% of people click beyond the first page of results.

Other search engines also appear to elevate their own products into the top of the list, but it's a concern that Google in particular, with its enormous market share, may be limiting the organic traffic flow to other, potentially superior products, and therefore limiting consumer choice in the long run.

Google denies manipulating search results in this way. "We rank search results to deliver the best and most relevant answers to users," a spokesperson told CHOICE. "If we delivered search results in a way that didn't serve our users' interests, they would simply go elsewhere."

However, Maureen Henninger, a search expert with the University of Technology, Sydney, believes Google has become too big. "It is not just search, it's all the other things they're involved in. They're buying up just about anything that works at the moment. Many people are concerned with any sort of a monopoly because from a consumer's point of view, they're not necessarily always getting the best of what they want to buy or search for."

Ad nauseam

Searching on Google, Bing and Yahoo! is free. But to be profitable, all three engines use paid advertising. Advertisers bid for the chance to appear on searches for certain pre-selected keywords. In practice, this means a company may appear on top of or in the sidebar of search results for the phrase "best toys", regardless of what toys they sell.

There isn't anything necessarily wrong with this system, so long as users are aware it exists. But sadly, many aren't. In the TAI study, 52% of survey respondents thought the web pages that tend to appear at the very top of their search results were those that were most relevant to their keywords. Only 40% believed they were most likely to be paid advertising.

According to TAI, "as with any free service, users do not necessarily invest much time or mental effort in ensuring that the service they are receiving is valuable or comes 'with a catch'".

The personal touch

Personalised search essentially predicts which results an individual user is most interested in receiving. This is done by recording a user's previous search results – and the top three all do it.

"Every time you click on something it's recorded and kept, so the search engines probably know more about you than you know about yourself," says Henninger. "They use that personalised search to give you information they think you want, as well as for producing personalised advertisements, which is what the search engines are in the business of doing."

This is why the same search done from two different computers can yield very different results. So if a Sydneysider searches for panthers, for example, their top result may be related to the Penrith Panthers rugby league club, whereas someone living in the US may get results relating to the animal.

This innovation seems like a great one – what could be better than getting the results you want, every time? But as Henninger argues, "it's constantly filtering what it thinks you want, rather than what you might really be interested in.

"If a journalist is using a search engine, they're going to be delivered results that are filtered, and [they'll write] stories that are then going to be filtered again through to the consumer of that story. So it's possible that the stories being written ... are really so filtered that [the end users aren't] getting anything other than what the search engines are trying to sell in the way of advertisements." She says that while this is an extreme projection, it is a possibility. ■

OPTING OUT

Concerned about your every online move being tracked? There is something you can do. For instructions on how to opt out of personalised search and advertising, search tips and a rundown of alternative search engines that don't keep track of your actions, go to choice.com.au/search.

ACCC takes action

In 2007 the ACCC took legal action against Google, alleging they had engaged in misleading and deceptive conduct by failing to adequately distinguish ads from "organic" search results and by allowing advertisers to use the names and trademarks of their competitors in their ad headlines. The ACCC lost their action against Google, but an appeal will be heard this month.

"The role of search engine providers as publishers of paid content needs to be closely examined in the online age," says ACCC chairman Rod Sims.

"Specifically, it is important that they are held directly accountable for misleading or deceptive paid search results when they have been closely engaged in presenting and publishing those results."

She'll be apples

Move over beer and wine – it's the summer of cider, as **Rachel Clemons** discovers.

Cider is the new black. Cider sales have increased by 34.7% in dollar terms in the past year, with new product development responsible for over a quarter of this growth. Forty-five new cider brands have been introduced in the past two years, almost doubling the number of active cider brands in the market. And while Australian liquor sales as a whole are decreasing at 0.5% annually, cider has increased 0.5% in value share over the past 12 months.

So what's behind this resurgence? Perhaps it was only a matter of time before Australia started catching up to the UK, where cider makes up 12.2% of the market. It's also a product that appeals to alcopop, beer and wine drinkers alike. Small-scale artisanal cider producers are popping up all over the country, so its comeback may also be related to the current trend to move away from big business back to supporting more traditional cottage industries. As one of our experts put it, "cider is the vinyl [record] of the alcohol industry".

Whether you're after sweet, sparkling, English-style or other (see below), there's a cider out there for everyone, as results of our blind taste test show.

Cider styles

French-style ciders typically undergo a traditional process known as keeving – the removal of nutrients from juice – followed by long, slow fermentation, resulting in a naturally sparkling, sweet, clear, full-flavoured cider that tends to be low in alcohol.

English-style generally refers to the flavour and mouthfeel of English West Country cider made from true English cider apple varieties. These tend to be rich in tannins, resulting in cider with high levels of astringency and bitterness.

Sparkling or still Many of the more traditional varieties of ciders are still, but sparkling ciders are more common. Bottle-conditioned or méthode champenoise ciders have undergone a secondary fermentation in the bottle to create the bubbles. Other methods of carbonation include adding carbon dioxide.

Dry or sweet A dry cider is achieved by fermenting the juice until most sugars have converted to alcohol. Sweet ciders can be achieved by adding sugar syrups or by pasteurisation, ultra filtration or slow fermentation (see left). The flavour of naturally sweet cider tends to be fruitier since the sweetness is derived from unfermented juice rather than from added sugar.

Tasting notes for every cider on test, as well as details of how we test, can be found at **choice.com.au/cider**

Perry is a cider made from pears instead of apples

Meet the experts

1. **Max Allen** is an award-winning wine columnist, author and backyard cider-maker. He was chief judge of the Australian Cider Awards in 2011, and is about to start small-scale commercial cider production.
2. **Mike Bennie** is a wine and drinks writer and journalist whose work appears in such publications as *Australian Gourmet Traveller Wine* and leading wine review website winefront.com.au. He is an active wine show judge and tastes ciders on industry panels.
3. **Chris Foster** has been working in the wine industry for more than 20 years. He oversees the independent group of Annandale Cellars, Cremorne Cellars and Northbridge Cellars, one of the major sponsors of the Australian Cider Awards 2011.
4. **James Kendell** began his 18-year career in the beverage and hospitality industry by cutting his teeth on cider and cider-making while living in the UK. He is the owner and founder of Small Acres Cyder, an award-winning cidery situated in the apple-growing region of Orange, NSW.

WHAT TO BUY... FOR EASY DRINKING

Our judges suggest these ciders have wide appeal, so are ideal for those who are new to drinking cider.

17 Boulard Cidre de Normandie Doux

$12.99 for 750mL

"Dry aromas of firm cider apples. Palate shows upfront fruit sweetness that finishes with perky astringency and faint appley tang. Offers a lot to novice and enthusiast drinkers." *Mike Bennie*

16 Aspall Draught Suffolk Cyder

$6.90 for 500mL

"Straw yellow. Almost wine-like (pinot gris) aroma, some pineapple. Nice mix of green and red apple on the palate. Clean, crisp with good length." *James Kendell*

16 Mercury Dry Cider

$4.79 for 750mL

"Very clear, pale, green-yellow-platinum appearance. Clean apple nose. Bright, clean, crisp, fresh apple crunch and tasty on the palate. Light fizz and length. Overall very clean, fresh and citrusy." *Chris Foster*

15.5 Batlow Premium Cider

$17.99 for 4 x 330mL

"Very pale, slight carbonation. Fresh, green apple tartness. Refreshing style."

Max Allen

15.5 Magners Original Irish Cider

$5.90 for 568mL

"Light golden appearance. Clean red apple aromas. Nice sweetness, length and balance for a medium-sweet cider. Clean, crisp finish." *James Kendell*

15.5 The Hills Cider Company Apple Cider

Best Buy

$19.99 for 6 x 330mL

"Crisp green apple aroma. Green apple continues on the palate, crisp finish, good balance. Clean with good apple flavour, crisp finish and nice length." *James Kendell*

WHAT TO BUY... IF YOU'RE FEELING ADVENTUROUS

Our experts rate the following ciders highly but suggest they may be more of an acquired taste.

16.5 Small Acres Cyder Somerset Still 2009*

$19.99 for 750mL

"Heady aromatics with baked apple intensity. Has the feel of traditional British cider. Offers a taut and sour palate with astringent feel; angular tannins make the experience interesting." *Mike Bennie*

16 Henney's Dry Cider

Best Buy

$7.98 for 500mL

"Medium gold, soft carbonation. Attractive true cider aromatics: spiced apple, some 'funk'. Palate is good and dry, slightly bitter, tannic and astringent – needs a good hunk of cheddar. Overall a good, dry, traditional cider style." *Max Allen*

15.5 Badger Applewood Cider

$8.90 for 500mL

"Medium-gold appearance with low carbonation. Nutty, cheesy and rustic farmhouse aromas. Full-flavoured and quite tannic, bitter and funky on the palate." *Max Allen*

WHAT TO BUY... IF YOU PREFER PEAR CIDER

15 Pipsqueak Pear Cider

$19.99 for 6 x 330mL

"Very pale with a slight spritz. Bright, confected aroma with a simple, ginger spice pear finish. Overall bright-tasting with spice and freshness."

Max Allen

15 Strongbow Summer Pear Cider

Best Buy

$14.99 for 6 x 355mL

"Aroma of pear drops and stone fruit pips; faintly nutty and exotic. Crunchy palate with light pear flavour. Faintly waxy feel and mineral-like tang. Brisk, effortless and pure with high drinkability." *Mike Bennie*

* James Kendell is the producer of this cider, and although all ciders were tasted blind we removed his score to avoid any possible conflict of interest.

ISTOCKPHOTO

Real deal?

Contrary to what you might expect, not all cider is produced from 100% fruit juice. Concentrate, water and sugar are often used in production. For more, visit choice.com.au/cider

89
The number of cider brands in Australia*

45
The number of cider brands introduced in the past two years*

		PERFORMANCE & DETAILS					
		Score (out of 20)	Made in	Bottle size (mL)	Price per bottle ($)	% alcohol	Classification
APPLE CIDERS	**Boulard** Cidre de Normandie Doux	17.0	France	750	12.99	2	Sweet
	Small Acres Cyder Somerset Still 2009	16.5 (A)	NSW, Australia	750	19.99	7	Dry
	Aspall Draught Suffolk Cyder	16.0	England	500	6.90	5.5	Dry
	Henney's Dry Cider	16.0	England	500	7.98	6	Dry
	Mercury Dry Cider	16.0	Tas, Australia	750	4.79	5.2	Dry
	Badger Applewood Cider	15.5	England	500	8.90	6	Medium
	Batlow Premium Cider	15.5	NSW, Australia	330	4.50	5.5	Medium
	Magners Original Irish Cider	15.5	Ireland	568	5.90	4.5	Medium dry
	The Hills Cider Company Apple Cider	15.5	SA, Australia	330	3.33	5	Dry
	Bulmers Original Cider	15.0	NSW, Australia	500	5.49	4.7	Medium
	Stassen Apple Cider	15.0	Belgium	330	3.60	5.4	Sweet
	Three Kings Cider	15.0	Vic, Australia	330	2.33	4.6	Medium
	Tooheys 5 Seeds	14.5	Australia & New Zealand	345	1.98	5	Medium sweet
	Matilda Bay Dirty Granny	14.0	Tas, Australia	345	2.48	5.5	Medium
	Old Mout Cider Scrumpy	14.0	New Zealand	330	4.50	8	Medium
	Pipsqueak Best Cider	14.0	Vic, Australia	330	3.33	5.2	Dry
	Samuel Smith's Organic Cider	14.0	England	550	9.40	5	Dry
	St Helier Apple Cider	14.0	England	500	7.99	5	Sweet
	Strongbow Dry	14.0	NSW, Australia	355	2.58	5	Medium
	Thatchers Green Goblin	14.0	England	500	7.99	6	Medium
	Three Oaks Cider Co Apple Cider	14.0	SA, Australia	330	2.86	5.3	Medium
	Cidrerie d'Anneville Cidre Traditionnel	13.5	France	750	14.99	4.5	Medium
	Kelly Brothers Sparkling Cider	13.5	Vic, Australia	330	3.33	7	Dry
	Coldstream Apple Cider	13.0	Vic, Australia	330	3.50	5	Medium
	Lobo Apple Cider	12.5	SA, Australia	330	4.50	5.7	Medium
	Monteith's Crushed Apple Cider	12.5	New Zealand	330	3.49	4.5	Sweet
	Westons Henry Weston's Oak Aged Herefordshire Cider 2010	12.5	England	500	6.99	8.2	Medium dry
PEAR CIDERS	**Pipsqueak** Pear Cider	15.0	Vic, Australia	330	3.33	4	Dry
	Strongbow Summer Pear Cider	15.0	NSW, Australia	355	2.50	5	Sweet
	Stassen Pear Cider	14.5	Belgium	330	3.60	5.4	Sweet
	The Hills Cider Company Pear Cider	14.5	SA, Australia	330	3.33	5	Medium
	Three Oaks Cider Co Pear Cider	14.5	SA, Australia	330	3.25	5	Medium
	Bulmers Pear Cider	14.0	NSW, Australia	500	4.99	4.7	Sweet
	Kelly Brothers Pure Pear Cider	14.0	Vic, Australia	330	4.33	5	Medium sweet
	Le Père Jules Poiré	14.0	France	750	19.99	4	Dry
	Badger Pearwood Cider	13.5	England	500	8.90	5	Medium sweet
	St Helier Pear Cider	13.5	England	500	7.99	5	Medium sweet
	Westons Cider Perry	13.5	England	500	6.50	7.4	Medium dry
	Monteith's Crushed Pear Cider	13.0	New Zealand	330	3.25	4.5	Sweet
	Kopparberg Pear Cider	12.5	Sweden	500	5.80	4.5	Sweet
	Magners Pear Irish Cider	12.5	Ireland	568	5.90	4.5	Medium dry
	Rekorderlig Premium Pear Cider	12.0	Sweden	500	5.90	4.5	Semi sweet

USING THE TABLE Prices are based on the price paid in Sydney liquor stores in November 2011. Individual bottle prices are calculated from the multipack prices where applicable. There can be big price variations, so shop around and keep an eye out for specials. **Classifications** of sweet, medium and dry were provided to us by the producer/supplier. These are self-designated and may be relative to other products under the same brand (Strongbow Sweet vs Strongbow Dry, for example) rather than across the entire category. **TABLE NOTE (A)** This is the average of the experts' individual scores for this cider, excluding James Kendell's. James is the producer of this cider, and although all ciders were tasted blind we removed his score to avoid any possible conflict of interest.

*SOURCE: NIELSEN 2011 CIDER REPORT

Million dollar baby

Finding good, affordable child care can be a tough gig. **Uta Mihm** and CHOICE members share their tips.

A good childcare centre is like gold dust to find – and these days seems just as expensive. And once you've sold a limb to pay for it, you then have to join the back of a very long queue to sign up.

In an effort to ensure decent centres are available to everyone, the federal government recently launched a program to raise the standard of care throughout the country. The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care is designed to improve the quality of child care over the next few years. However, it's also likely to raise costs. Where that leaves parents and their children is unclear.

In a recent survey, CHOICE asked parents about accessibility, affordability and quality of child care. What we found is worrying: fewer than half of parents with children in long day care (LDC) were very satisfied with the quality of care, only one in five with the ease of securing a place, and a paltry one in 10 with the cost.

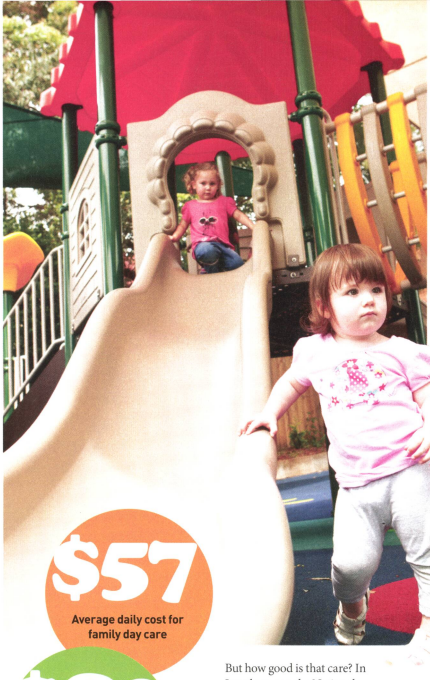
"We're currently trying to find child care for my 14-month-old baby and it's a nightmare," says Nicola from NSW, summing up the frustrations of many parents. "There are no places and high fees to get onto very long waiting lists. How are women supposed to get back into the workforce?"

Nutshell

- Our survey of more than 200 parents found many are concerned about the cost of child care.
- Avoiding waiting lists is no mean feat – savvy parents share some tricks here.

Good care counts

Quality child care is essential – the first three years of a child's life have been shown to have a huge impact on their development, learning and wellbeing. At latest estimate, 410,500 children are enrolled in LDC across Australia.



$57
Average daily cost for family day care

$80
Average daily cost for long day care

$31.60
Maximum weekly government benefit for parents using a nanny

But how good is that care? In June last year, the National Childcare Accreditation Council found many centres fell short in a number of areas:

- 27% in ensuring toileting and nappy-changing are positive experiences
- 25% in supporting each child's rest, sleep and comfort needs
- 23% in implementing effective and current food health and hygiene practices
- 21% in assisting each child to be a successful learner
- 19% in ensuring potentially dangerous objects are not accessible to children

And, a recent report found preschool children in Victoria and Queensland received on average a low level of support for expanding their knowledge and understanding. New regulations have been in effect since 1 January, but even if you find out your day care centre is a poor performer, you may not be able to take your child elsewhere. "I am not 100% happy with the only available option in our town," Natalie from NSW tells us, "but unfortunately we have little choice."

Hurry up – then wait

Getting your child into quality LDC can take several years. Sacha from SA suggests that "as soon as your pregnancy is confirmed, get on as many waiting lists as you can. I went on four, and none of the LDC centres had a spot available when I wanted to return to work. My child was 11 months old, and I'd been on the waiting lists for 18 months at that point." For tips on how to beat the waiting lists, see Winning the Waiting Game, right.

Finding LDC is much more of a problem for parents living in cities than for those in country areas. About 70% of city parents responding to our survey did not find care easily compared with 44% of those living in a regional or rural area who had trouble.

Kiddie costs

The average childcare cost for our survey respondents was $78.50 per day, with wide variations depending on the type of child care used and where they lived. The average daily cost for city parents is about $84, compared with about $62 for parents in a regional or country area.

As well as LDC and care given by relatives or friends, there are two other main childcare options:

Family day care (FDC) About 110,000 children in Australia are in FDC, where carers look after children in their own homes and usually operate within schemes managed by community or government organisations. FDC is the cheapest option we found, with an average daily cost of $57 compared with $80 on average for LDC. FDC also scored much better on quality in our survey, with 74% of parents very satisfied.

Nannies Respondents using nanny services also gave high ratings for quality, but the costs can be prohibitive for many parents, and prices can vary widely depending on hours of care and whether you share the nanny with another family. In our survey, the price paid ranged from $88 to $250 per day.

While the Child Care Rebate (see far right) helps with the costs of LDC and FDC, it's not available for care by a nanny. Julie from Victoria takes issue with this exception: "Nanny costs should be tax deductible, if not rebatable. Use of a nanny, although arguably a higher socioeconomic means of child care, frees up a spot for those who require other forms of child care."

Even if you find your day care centre is a poor performer, you may not be able to take your child elsewhere

The nanny state

The government's Child Care Benefit is means-tested, with the maximum amount only available if you receive an income support payment such as a Centrelink pension or have a family income of less than $39,785. Cut-offs for a partial benefit depend on the number of children you have ($143,095 is the cut-off if you have two, for example). The benefit is available for up to 50 hours per week if you're working, training or studying. For 2011-12 it was $3.78 per hour (up to $189 per week) for approved child care such as LDC; registered child care, such as care by a nanny, was subsidised by only 63 cents per hour (up to $31.60 per week).

The Child Care Rebate is only available for approved child care. It's not means-tested and refunds 50% of your childcare costs up to a maximum benefit of $7500 per year. The average annual rebate families received was about $2100 per child in 2010-11.

In a confusing bureaucratic twist, you need to apply for the Child Care Benefit to receive the Child Care Rebate, even if your income is above the cut-offs. No wonder about 100,000 families are missing out. You also need to be working, studying or have an exemption from both. For more information, go to familyassist.gov.au or call the Family Assistance Office on 13 61 50. ■

Winning the waiting game

Parents responding to our survey give a clear sense of how hard finding good care – or indeed any care – can be. Here they offer tips on how to handle the wait.

"You have to budget for a non-refundable amount of about $50 for each list you get on. Then you have to harass, beg, cajole, plead, stalk and bribe your way to securing a place. It's the last disorderly frontier of an otherwise civilised society." *– Ray*

"I placed my daughter on five waiting lists at birth. When it got closer to when I was to return to work I'd heard nothing, so I rang around all the childcare centres in the area. In the end the place I got had nothing to do with a waiting list, it was just pot luck." *– Lizzie*

"I spent months waiting for a place to come up in one of three local childcare centres. In the end, on the advice of several friends, I summoned up as much negative energy as I could, walked into a centre and burst into tears. Within two days I was called back for an available spot. The fight to get a spot is like warfare. You have to pull out whatever artillery you have (sick parents, redundant partner and above all tears) in order to be considered." *– Sara*

"In my area, often the only way to get a spot is to try enrolling your child in a brand new centre before it opens. I actually took to scanning the development applications in my area whenever I saw a building going up that looked like it could be a new centre just to secure a spot." *– Kate*

One year on

The Australian Consumer Law was introduced a year ago to protect your rights, but has anything changed? **Elise Dalley** finds out.

Undeniably the biggest overhaul of consumer rights in decades, the Australian Consumer Law (ACL) has certainly been a breakthrough. But all is not well with the law introduced on 1 January 2011; one of its biggest problems is that so few people know about it.

ACL combined 20 different state and federal laws into a single piece of legislation to offer uniform consumer rights across the country. Using its new powers under the ACL, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has already investigated unfair contracts from airlines, telcos and car hire companies – industries with the highest level of consumer complaints (see Car Hire Crackdown, opposite). And, for the first time, the ACCC and state and territory fair trading offices can issue infringement notices.

There have already been some wins. In July 2011, the Federal Court fined Optus $5.3 million for misleading advertising of its broadband plans, hoping it would be a deterrent to those who see misleading advertising as profitable.

What's in the ACL?

- **Unfair contract terms are now regulated.** A court can void a consumer contract if it deems that it causes significant imbalance between parties and is not necessary to protect the legitimate interests of the signatories.
- **ACL provides you with express rights when purchasing goods and services.** It includes 12 consumer guarantees across goods and services.
- **Tighter regulation for door-to-door sales.**

Seeking clarity

Knowing that the new laws exist is one thing; understanding them is another. Despite clarity being a goal of the new laws, the fact they define "consumer" in four different ways gives some idea of their complexity. Consumer law experts agree they've turned out to be less user-friendly than hoped.

90% of people know they have consumer rights

48% of consumers know what their rights actually are when making a purchase*

Professor Stephen Corones from the Queensland University of Technology, who was involved in deciding how product warranties should be worded in the new laws, tells CHOICE there were a number of different views about what the definition of consumer should be during consultation, but in the end it was agreed "we should adopt one definition uniformly". He believes the decision to steer away from the single definition was unfortunate because it detracts from the clarity of the law and cost effectiveness of compliance. Professor Gail Pearson from the University of Sydney Business School tells us "the legislation does not fully realise the expectations of the community of simple, easily accessible rules".

John Rau, Deputy Premier of South Australia and Chair of the Legislative and Governance Forum on Consumer

Affairs, argues the ongoing education of both consumers and traders will be crucial to making the laws work. A key goal for consumers, he says, is "to be aware where they can get help when things go wrong". Consumers can access fact sheets about the law and how it affects them at www.consumerlaw.gov.au.

Despite the shortcomings, the federal government appears to be behind the spirit of the new laws from both a consumer and business standpoint. "Markets work more effectively when consumers are confident they can transact with business knowing there are clear rights and responsibilities, and when businesses are free to compete and innovate to serve consumer needs," says David Bradbury, Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer.

The goals of stronger and uniform consumer protection are laudable, but the effect of the new laws on transactions in the consumer marketplace will only be known as each new provision is put to the test.

$14.2 billion

The estimated cost of resolving consumer problems in 2010**

Car hire crackdown

As part of its investigation into the car rental industry, the ACCC started proceedings against Europcar Tasmania in November last year, alleging the company overcharged customers to repair damage and failed to refund overcharged amounts due to unfair clauses in contracts.

Linda Whittaker had a similar situation with Europcar Canberra. In September 2011 she paid $1305.12 to hire a Toyota HiAce Commuter van for eight days, which included a $283.60 peace-of-mind fee to limit damage liability to $990, as well as a 22% location surcharge, 3.5% administration fee and 1.5% credit card surcharge.

After one of the van's windows was smashed by vandals, Linda sought quotes for repair before returning it to Europcar and filing an incident form.

The following week, Linda's credit card was charged $1270.71, not the $990 limited liability amount she had expected. Europcar had recalculated the total amount owing, adding the maximum damage liability to the vehicle hire so that the location surcharge, admin fee and credit card surcharge were all calculated on the total of both these charges, with GST (10%) then added on top. Europcar also charged Linda the maximum $990, despite her quotes to repair the window falling between $300 and $458.

A Europcar rep claimed the damage liability fee was subject to additional fees and charges before GST. Linda alleges Europcar failed to verbally disclose this when selling the peace-of-mind protection. Fortunately, under the ACL Linda can lodge a complaint with the ACCC to resolve her dispute.

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE...

Watch out for these common breaches of your rights.

No refund – store credit only
Consumers are entitled to a refund for products found to have a major fault. Under the ACL, a major failure with a product is when: you would not have purchased it had you known about the problem; it is significantly different from the description, sample or demonstration you were shown; it is substantially unfit for its purpose; or it is unsafe.

Out of warranty = no remedy
Regardless of warranties, consumer guarantees require a product to be of acceptable quality throughout its reasonable life. This length of time can be determined by the court. However, it may often be longer than the warranty period, especially in the case of an expensive product such as an oven or fridge.

You signed the contract, now you're bound by it
Courts now have the power to cancel unfair contract terms. This can include unfair behaviour hidden away in terms and conditions fine print.

Extended warranty = better protection
An extended warranty may charge extra for protection you are already entitled to under the law, so be aware these are not always worthwhile. ■

* FROM THE AUSTRALIAN CONSUMER SURVEY REPORT 2010
**BASED ON THE DIRECT COSTS AND TIME SPENT DEALING WITH PROBLEMS | ISTOCKPHOTO

Getting your head straight

When you're feeling under siege and overwhelmed, who can you turn to for help and what should you look for? **Karina Bray** outlines your options.

It's estimated one in five Australians has suffered from a mental health problem in the past 12 months, and almost half of us will experience a mental health disorder in our lifetime. Whether you're floundering for purpose and direction, having relationship problems or suffering serious health issues based on drug and alcohol abuse, there are many professionals who can help.

For problems such as anxiety, stress, depression, grief or difficulties with coping, your first port of call could be your GP, who in turn may refer you to a psychiatrist, psychologist or another mental health practitioner.

This referral may be part of the government's Better Access mental health care initiative – see Care in the Community, page 38. The alternative is to seek the help of a psychologist or counsellor yourself, which in fact is what many people do.

Who is a psychiatrist?

A psychiatrist is a qualified medical doctor with additional training and qualifications to become a specialist in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental illness and emotional problems.

Psychiatrists are able to prescribe medication to treat people and have specialised knowledge of mental health disorders caused by biological changes in the brain, such as schizophrenia, dementia and delirium.

To see a psychiatrist you'll need a referral from your GP. Ask your doctor if they think talking to a psychiatrist would be appropriate and useful – they might suggest a psychologist or counsellor is a better option. If your doctor feels you could benefit from talking to a psychiatrist, they may well bring it up with you first.

Training Becoming a doctor requires five or six years of university study followed by 12 months as an intern in a general hospital. This is followed by at least another year in a hospital as a Resident Medical Officer. Postgraduate training in psychiatry, conducted by the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, takes at least five years, during which time doctors work under supervision in hospitals and community clinics with children, families, adults and the elderly on a full range of psychiatric problems. Experience and competence are tested throughout the training process.

Costs vary greatly depending upon whether you see a psychiatrist through a public health service, such as a community health centre, or privately. Medicare rebates are available, though out-of-pocket expenses may apply if the doctor doesn't bulk bill. Make sure you ask about costs and billing when you make your first appointment.

A psychologist?

Psychologists deal with everything from depression, stress, anxiety, eating disorders and suicidal thoughts to improving relationships and personal growth. The professional title is restricted to psychologists who are registered with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency via the Psychology Board of Australia (PsyBA).

Psychologists aim to change the behaviour and thought processes of their patients, teaching them skills to function better and improve their quality of life without the use of medication. A typical patient undergoes short-term treatment in a series of four to 10 sessions. Sometimes a single session will suffice, while other patients will need long-term treatment and support.

Some impressive-sounding qualifications may not have accreditation with relevant peak bodies or be government-accredited

The psychologist should give you an indication of how many sessions will be required at your first meeting.

Training Psychologists undergo an accredited four-year university degree, and after two years of postgraduate supervised practice can be registered with the PsyBA. Clinical psychologists have an additional two-year postgraduate masters degree (which also entails supervision), and while they may charge

Talk it out

Psychotherapy is any kind of psychological talking therapy that aims to restructure the personality or self. Many trained mental health professionals practise psychotherapy, including psychiatrists, psychologists, general practitioners, counsellors, art/music/drama therapists and social workers. It's also possible to train as a psychotherapist at postgraduate level without having a therapeutic background.

As with the term "counsellor", anyone from a correspondence course enthusiast to a psychiatrist can call themselves a psychotherapist so if they're not a registered psychiatrist or psychologist, look for qualifications (such as a Master of Medicine in Psychotherapy for medical doctors) and/or membership of an appropriate professional association (ACA or PACFA-member organisation) to ensure they've undergone accredited training and meet ethical and work practice standards.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- **Qualifications** There are many different diplomas and degrees on offer. Be warned, though, that some impressive-sounding qualifications may not have accreditation with relevant peak bodies or be government accredited either. Your best bet is to look for membership of an industry association.
- **Strengths and interests of person** Some therapists specialise in particular areas such as drug and alcohol management, family therapy, eating disorders, sports psychology or relationships. Keep this in mind when searching or seeking referral for a therapist or counsellor.
- **Approach** Therapists and counsellors use different approaches, from cognitive-behavioural therapy, expressive arts and psychoanalytic therapy to somatic psychotherapy, hypnotherapy and transactional analysis and many more in between. You may find a particular approach feels right for you – see More Information, page 39, for useful resources.
- **Interpersonal compatibility** The relationship between you and your therapist is an extremely important aspect of therapy. If you don't click with them, move on as quickly as you can.

ISTOCK PHOTO

more, they can offer a higher Medicare rebate (where applicable).

Costs The Australian Psychological Society recommends fees of $119 for up to half an hour or $218 for one hour, however it's up to the individual practitioner. Current Medicare rebates under the Better Access initiative (see Care in the Community, below) are $83.25 per session for a psychologist and $122.15 per session for a clinical psychologist, and while some may bulk-bill, others may charge a gap fee, so check what the out-of-pocket costs will be.

$218

The hourly fee for a psychologist recommended by the Australian Psychological Society (though it's up to the individual practitioner)

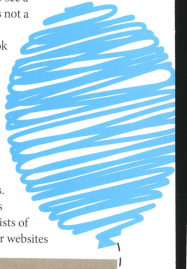
There's no Medicare rebate if you see a psychologist without a referral, though your private health insurance extras cover may offer a rebate – check with your fund, as benefits are sometimes very limited. Your private health insurance may also cover any extra sessions you require above and beyond those allowed under Better Access.

Counsellor

Unlike psychiatrists and psychologists, counsellors have a wide and varied level of training. Unfortunately anyone can call themselves a counsellor, whether they've done a correspondence course that teaches the basics, a two-year diploma or the six years of training and supervision required for the Masters of Counselling Psychology – or no training whatsoever.

Training Membership of one of the professional associations for counsellors means the counsellor has undergone an accredited training program of at least two years, undergoes continuing professional development and meets agreed ethical and professional practice standards. The Australian Counselling Association (ACA) is a national peak association for counsellors and psychotherapists with more than 3000 members. The Psychotherapists and Counsellors Federation of Australia (PACFA) is an umbrella organisation for 37 member organisations. Individual counsellors and psychotherapists join one of these organisations – they may advertise membership of either PACFA, the member organisation or both. Counselling psychologists may or may not be members of the Australian Psychological Society, PACFA or ACA, but they are registered with PsyBA.

If you'd like to see a counsellor who's not a registered psychologist, look for a member of either ACA or a PACFA member organisation so you can be confident they have adequate training and ethical standards. Both peak bodies have searchable lists of members on their websites



Care in the community

In recognising that many people were not seeking, or able to get, the help they needed for many common mental health issues, the federal government introduced the Better Access to Psychiatrists, Psychologists and General Practitioners through the Medical Benefits Schedule (Better Access) initiative, which began in 2006.

What's it all about?

Under the scheme, which was revised in 2011, patients can receive Medicare rebates for 10 individual and/or 10 group sessions per calendar year with a psychologist, occupational therapist or social worker who's had appropriate training in mental health services. The treatment is an integral part of the General Practitioner Mental Health Treatment Plan and encourages a team-based, multidisciplinary approach to mental health care in the community.

The type of treatment offered is a two-tier system, with clinical psychologists offering what's called "psychological therapy" and psychologists, social workers and occupational therapists offering "focused psychological strategies services" such as cognitive behavioural therapy, stress management or interpersonal therapy. Some argue the difference between the two treatment types is ill-defined and notional at best, and that psychologists with skills, experience and training equal to or greater than those of clinical psychologists are being unfairly penalised with a lower Medicare benefit.

What it doesn't do

The Better Access initiative is designed to provide treatment for common mental disorders such as depression and anxiety, where short-term interventions are likely to be useful in cases of mild to moderate severity. It isn't designed to provide intensive, ongoing therapy for people with severe, ongoing illness or with more complex or intensive care needs. In such cases, referral to Medicare-subsidised consultant psychiatrist services or state/territory specialised mental health services may be more appropriate, especially if affordability is an issue.

Top: eCouch website (for depression, generalised anxiety and worry, social anxiety, relationship breakdown and loss and grief)

Below: MoodGym website (for depression only)

so you can find one that suits your specific needs and location. They're also collaborating to provide a single master list of all counsellors and therapists in Australia.

Phone counselling

There are several free telephone counselling services on offer, the main ones being Lifeline, Crisis Support Services and Kids Helpline.

Anyone can call themselves a counsellor, whether they've done six years of tertiary training or no training at all

Cost Counsellors charge between $60-$150 per session. Some charge more or less than this, or may charge according to a client's financial circumstances. At present there are limited benefits for members insured with Medibank Private (extras cover), providing the counsellor is accredited with ACA or PACFA. The peak bodies are looking to extend private health coverage of counselling. Counsellors who are registered psychologists may charge more, but you may be eligible for Medicare or private health rebates.

A 2002 comprehensive review of telephone and web-based counselling services for the federal government determined that the quality of service was of a high professional standard and that customers were very satisfied with the help they received.

Phone services are often staffed by volunteers who are professional counsellors, psychologists and social workers, and training at Certificate IV level may be offered to people who aren't otherwise qualified. While best known for crisis support (the big ones are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week), they also offer assistance with relationship issues, loss and grief, drug, alcohol and gambling problems and mental health and wellbeing.

Online therapy

MoodGym and eCouch (see left) are free online programs designed and developed by staff at the Centre for Mental Health Research at the Australian National University, in collaboration with other experts. They provide evidence-based information and teach strategies for coping drawn from cognitive, behavioural and interpersonal therapies as well as relaxation and physical activity.

Bibliotherapy

There are many self-help therapy books offering information, insight and therapeutic strategies (usually based on cognitive-behavioural therapy). Though some are undoubtedly better than others, studies on the effectiveness of bibliotherapy for depression have found that it's almost always better than no treatment, and sometimes as good as professional therapy. The Black Dog Institute website (below) has a list of books that can help with depression (look under Depression/Treatments/Self-help & alternate therapies). ■

More information

- Australian Psychological Society, **psychology.org.au**
- Australian Counselling Association, **theaca.net.au**
- Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia, **pacfa.org.au**
- Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists, **ranzcp.org**
- Reach Out (information and resources for young people), **au.reachout.com**
- Black Dog Institute, **blackdoginstitute.org.au**
- MoodGym, **moodgym.anu.edu.au**
- E-Couch, **ecouch.anu.edu.au**

Nutshell

- CHOICE reviewed prepared French, Italian and Caesar salad dressings for nutrition and taste.
- There were no major standouts in our taste test, so we recommend making your own instead.

Dress it up

With the right ingredients, creating your own salad dressing is a quick and delicious alternative to the bottled stuff, writes **Rebecca Gatto**.

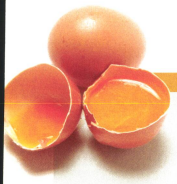
A fresh salad teamed with the right dressing becomes a light, tasty and healthy accompaniment to any meal. Salad dressings are simple to put together with everyday ingredients you can find in your pantry. But take a walk down the supermarket aisle and you'll find a vast variety of dressings boasting traditional recipes, fat-free alternatives and seasonal flavour sensations. According to Retail World's *2010 Annual Report*, $79.4 million of prepared salad dressings were sold in that year. Goodman Fielder (which manufactures Praise and Paul Newman's Own) and Kraft are the main producers.

CHOICE reviewed three popular types of salad dressing – French, Italian and Caesar – from major supermarkets and delis. We analysed their nutritional content and also conducted a blind taste test, with each one sampled by at least 30 CHOICE staff members.

Oil and seasoning (salt and pepper) are the core ingredients in all three dressing varieties we tested, so it's no surprise that many are high in fat and sodium. However, some are particularly salty, while half list sugar as one of their first three ingredients. The products in our What to Buy lists (opposite, and pages 42 and 43) rate best for taste, and are reasonable for sugar too. But go easy on how much you use – while an average 20g serve size won't contribute too much to your daily fat and sodium intake, it can add up if you're heavy-handed with your pouring.

These pre-prepared dressings may be convenient, but in order to control the amount of added salt we recommend making your own. With basic ingredients you can whip up an easy salad dressing in no time. A simple vinaigrette will cost you about $1.35 for 100mL. Our home economist, Fiona Mair, shares her recipes here.

Some salad dressings we tested are particularly salty, while half list sugar as one of their first three ingredients



	Price per 100mL ($)	% giving a positive rating overall	Serving size (mL)	Energy (kJ per serve)	Total fat (g per 100g)	Saturated fat (g per 100g)	Sugars (g per 100g)	Sodium (mg per 100g)
Beerenberg Creamy Parmesan Caesar (A)	1.50	48	20	204	21 ■	1.5 ●	12.8 ▲	1210 ■
Paul Newman's Own Creamy Caesar	1.73	48	20	455	58.9 ■	8.9 ■	1.8 ●	755 ■
Coles Caesar Dressing with Garlic and Parmesan Cheese	0.86	47	20	278	32.6 ■	3.5 ▲	5.3 ▲	1120 ■
Coles Caesar Dressing	2.40	39	25	400	40.4 ■	3.7 ▲	5 ●	734 ■
Kraft Caesar (A)	1.09	35	20	249	28.7 ■	5.1 ■	6.7 ▲	754 ■
Praise Caesar	1.15	35	20	270	26.8 ■	3.3 ▲	13.6 ▲	1290 ■
Cardini's The Original Caesar Dressing	1.48	32	29	653	58 ■	9.3 ■	1 ●	824.6 ■
Michael's Fine Foods Caesar Dressing (A)	1.43	31	50	694.74	34.9 ■	4.82 ▲	0.84 ●	981.9 ■
Paul Newman's Own Caesar	1.73	28	20	390	49.2 ■	5.3 ■	3.6 ●	960 ■
Woolworths Select Salad Dressing Caesar	0.93	25	20	316	32.5 ■	5.1 ■	13.8 ▲	1410 ■
Taylors Caesar Dressing	1.43	23	25	241	16.5 ▲	1.8 ▲	17.5 ■	1100 ■
Kraft Caesar 99% Fat Free (A)	1.09	19	20	68	<1 ●	<1 ●	9.4 ▲	948 ■
Praise Caesar 99% Fat Free	1.15	16	20	100	<1 ●	<1 ●	17.6 ■	970 ■

USING THE TABLE See page 42.

Egg yolks provide the creamy base for a Caesar dressing, and parmesan cheese is a key ingredient. Typical background flavours of this dressing include garlic, anchovy fillet, lemon juice and Worcestershire sauce. Olive oil acts as the emulsifier, blending all the ingredients together.

All the Caesar dressings on test have red lights for sodium. A 50mL serving of the Michael's Fine Foods Caesar Dressing will give you enough sodium for one day (the adequate daily intake of sodium is 460mg–920mg), though bear in mind its recommended serving size is twice that of most others on test. Only two Caesar dressings, from Kraft and Praise, get the green light for total and saturated fat. They're the only fat-free options in the bunch but didn't score well among our tasters, who ranked them bottom of the list.

Beerenberg Creamy Parmesan Caesar Dressing and **Paul Newman's Own Creamy Caesar** were the favourites among our tasting panel, followed closely by the cheapest in the group, **Coles Caesar Dressing with Garlic and Parmesan Cheese**. Beerenberg is the only non-fat-free dressing to get the green light for saturated fat and has almost a third as much total fat as the Paul Newman's Own product (though it's comparatively high in sodium).

As you'd expect, dressings that were described by our testers as having a creamy texture tended to receive higher overall scores, followed by other descriptors such as herb or smooth. Alternatively, dressings that were described as oily/greasy, bitter or gritty scored lower overall.

Caesar dressing is slightly more complex to make from scratch than other dressings, but once you have all the ingredients putting it together can be a breeze. Our homemade recipe will cost you more than supermarket dressings at $1.94 per 100mL.

Caesar dressing

Makes 1 cup

Ingredients

3 large egg yolks
1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
3 tablespoons lemon juice
2 cloves garlic
2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
6 anchovy fillets
1 cup olive oil
¾ cup finely grated parmesan cheese
Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
Cos lettuce, washed and dried (cut crosswise into 2cm-thick slices), fresh croutons and parmesan cheese shavings to serve

Method Combine the egg yolks, mustard, lemon juice, garlic, anchovies and Worcestershire sauce in a food processor (you could also use a stick blender or hand whisk).

While blending, slowly drizzle in oil until thick and creamy. Stir in parmesan. Add salt and pepper to taste. Chill in the refrigerator before serving.

Pour over lettuce and croutons, top with shavings of parmesan cheese.

Note: This dressing shouldn't be stored for longer than one week. If making by hand, mash the garlic and anchovies and add water or extra lemon juice if the dressing is too thick.

WHAT TO BUY

Left to right

- **Beerenberg Creamy Parmesan**
- **Paul Newman's Own Creamy Caesar**
- **Coles Caesar Dressing with Garlic and Parmesan Cheese**

Italian dressing

Traditional Italian dressing is a simple combination of oil and vinegar, but to spice it up you can also include garlic and Italian herbs such as basil and oregano.

Only the Red Kelly's Tasmania and Maleny Cuisine Italian dressings get the green light for sodium. However, the Maleny Cuisine is the sweetest across all categories with a staggering 42.5g of sugar per 100g. Interestingly, the most expensive dressing in this group is the Coles Italian Salad Dressing at $2.40 per 100mL. On the other hand, the cheapest, Woolworths Home Brand Italian Dressing 99% Fat Free, gets the same overall score from the taste-testers and costs less than a quarter of the price.

Our tasting panel preferred Italian dressings they described as having a herb taste. Other descriptors that had a positive impact were oily and smooth. Dressings that were described as watery or bitter tended to receive lower overall scores. Maleny Cuisine scored worst for individual flavour and texture even though it was not the worst overall. Its texture was described by 71% of taste-testers as watery, while 69% rightly described its flavour as sweet given its relatively huge sugar content.

Again, we recommend making your own Italian dressing. As well as controlling the amount of salt that goes into dressing, you can also add as many or as few herbs as you wish, or even choose to just use olive oil and vinegar. Our recipe (right) costs $1 per 100mL.

WHAT TO BUY

● **Praise Italian**

Makes 1 cup

Ingredients

3/4 cup extra virgin olive oil
1/4 cup red or white wine vinegar
1/2 clove garlic, finely chopped
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano
1/2 teaspoon dried basil
Salt and pepper to taste
Optional: Add one tablespoon of fresh parsley to the dressing just before serving. You can also substitute one tablespoon of balsamic vinegar for one tablespoon of red or white wine vinegar if you prefer.

Method

Combine all ingredients in a jar and shake until mixture is slightly thickened.
Note: You can store this dressing in your fridge for several weeks. The oil will solidify, but bring the dressing back to room temperature and shake well and it will return to normal consistency.

	Price per 100mL ($)	% giving a positive rating overall	Serving size (mL)	Energy (kJ per serve)	Total fat (g per 100g)	Saturated fat (g per 100g)	Sugars (g per 100g)	Sodium (mg per 100g)
Praise Italian	1.15	40	20	170	18.4 ▲	2.2 ▲	7.9 ▲	1130 ■
Praise Deli Style with Extra Virgin Olive Oil Italian Herb Vinaigrette	1.62	31	20	160	17.7 ▲	2.4 ▲	8.3 ▲	755 ■
Coles Italian Salad Dressing	2.40	31	25	266	18.2 ▲	2.2 ▲	7.6 ▲	700 ■
Michael's Fine Foods Oil free Italian Salad Dressing (A)	1.43	31	50	81.3	0.03 ●	0.01 ●	13.05 ▲	964.34 ■
Woolworths Home Brand Italian Dressing 99% Fat Free	0.34	31	25	95	<1 ●	<1 ●	24.1 ■	1320 ■
Kraft Italian (A) (B)	1.10	29	20	145	14.3 ▲	1.7 ▲	8.5 ▲	702 ■
Woolworths Select Salad Dressing Italian	0.93	23	20	150	4.6 ▲	0.5 ●	9.3 ▲	1200 ■
Kraft 99% fat free Italian Salad Dressing (A)	1.09	21	20	49	<1 ●	<1 ●	11.1 ▲	977 ■
Red Kellys Tasmania Italian Dressing (A)	1.44	17	20	300	30.2 ■	2 ▲	20.4 ▲	96 ●
Taylors Italian Dressing	1.43	17	25	87	<0.1 ●	<0.1 ●	19.1 ■	594 ▲
Woolworths Select Salad Dressing Italian 99% Fat Free	0.93	17	20	72	0.8 ●	0.2 ●	16.9 ■	1460 ■
Maleny Cuisine Italian Style Salad Dressing (A)	1.22	9	25	183	0.1 ●	0 ●	42.5 ■	5 ●
Praise Italian 100% Fat Free	1.15	9	20	40	0 ●	0 ●	10.1 ▲	1160 ■

USING THE TABLE Score is based on the percentage of triallists that gave the particular dressing a positive rating overall. We define a positive rating as one of five or more out of seven. This gives a better representation than an average score of who actually preferred the particular dressing. **Nutrients** are based on information provided on the nutrition panel. **Traffic light criteria** are based on the latest nutrition recommendations and dietary guidelines established by government health experts in Australia and internationally. **Fat** (g/100g) ● ≤3; ▲ 3.1-19.9; ■ ≥20. **Saturated fat** (g/100g) ● ≤1.5; ▲ 1.6-4.9; ■ ≥5. **Sugar** (g/100g) ● ≤5; ▲ 5.1-14.9; ■ ≥15. **Sodium** (mg/100g) ● ≤120; ▲ 121-599; ■ ≥600. **Price per 100mL** Recommended retail, as of October 2011. **TABLE NOTES (A)** These products are gluten-free. **(A)** This product has new packaging and some slight changes to the nutritional and ingredients list information, and is labelled Kraft Italian Salad Dressing.

French dressing

WHAT TO BUY

- **Woolworths Home Brand French Dressing 99% Fat Free**

French salad dressings, also known as vinaigrettes, traditionally consist of a mixture of vinegar, oil and Dijon mustard. Additional ingredients such as herbs and garlic can also be added, and they're common in the dressings found in supermarkets. Only the Michael's Fine Foods French Vinaigrette, which includes Dijon mustard in its formulation, reflects a more traditional recipe.

All the French dressings get a red light for sodium except the Taylors.

The Praise French 100% Fat Free, Woolworths Select and Taylors get a red light for sugar, and while Michael's Fine Foods is the only French dressing to get the green light for sugar, it's also the only one to get the red light for total and saturated fat, with 60.6g and 6.4g per 100g respectively.

Interestingly, the top three brands from our taste test are all fat-free products, and the number one, **Woolworths Home Brand**, is the cheapest of the bunch. On the other hand, two of the more expensive dressings, Michael's Fine Foods and Taylors, rank at the bottom of the table (below).

In our analysis, we found that when it came to assessing taste and texture, descriptors such as smooth, herb, vinegar, sweet and garlic were associated with higher overall scores. Conversely, dressings that were described as watery tended to get lower overall scores. Taylors ranked at the bottom, with 76% of people describing its texture as watery – significantly more than the other dressings in the group. This dressing is also the sweetest in the group, which 44% of taste-testers noticed, describing its flavour as sweet. Despite Michael's Fine Foods having a more traditional formulation, it wasn't a hit with our tasting panel, with only 17% giving it a positive rating overall. Some commented that it was "too creamy/heavy for a French dressing", and "not quite what you expect from a French dressing".

Making your own French dressing is simple and allows you to control the amount of salt you add to it. Fiona's recipe below costs $1.37 per 100mL. ■

Makes 1 cup

Ingredients

1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
¼ cup white wine vinegar
¾ cup olive oil
Salt and pepper to taste

Method

Combine all ingredients in a jar and shake until mixture is slightly thickened.

Note: You can store this dressing in your fridge for several weeks. The oil will solidify, but bring the dressing back to room temperature and shake well and it will return to normal consistency.

	Price per 100mL ($)	% giving a positive rating overall	Serving size (mL)	Energy (kJ per serve)	Total fat (g per 100g)	Saturated fat (g per 100g)	Sugars (g per 100g)	Sodium (mg per 100g)
Woolworths Home Brand French Dressing 99% Fat Free	0.34	47	25	80	<1 ●	<1 ●	13.6 ▲	1220 ■
Kraft French Herb 100% Fat Free (A)	1.33	41	20	51	<1 ●	<1 ●	12.8 ▲	1260 ■
Praise French 100% Fat Free	1.15	41	20	60	0 ●	0 ●	16.3 ■	1095 ■
Kraft French Salad Dressing (A)	1.09	38	20	166	15.6 ▲	1.8 ▲	12.2 ▲	1190 ■
Woolworths Select Salad Dressing French 99% Fat Free	0.93	37	20	75	0.4 ●	0.3 ●	18.5 ■	1190 ■
Praise Deli Style with Extra Virgin Olive Oil French Vinaigrette	1.62	26	20	165	18.4 ▲	2.5 ▲	8.1 ▲	620 ■
Praise French	1.15	23	20	190	18.2 ▲	2.1 ▲	13 ▲	1055 ■
Michael's Fine Foods French Vinaigrette Salad Dressing (A)	1.43	17	50	134	60.6 ■	6.4 ■	1 ●	880 ■
Taylors French Dressing	1.43	12	25	97	<0.1 ●	<0.1 ●	22.4 ■	553 ▲

USING THE TABLE See left.

Ask the Experts

Got a niggling question our team can help with?

In *CHOICE*, July 2011 you compared prices between new LED globes and CFLs but didn't include the cost of power needed to run these globes. Rising power costs could make LEDs an attractive option in spite of the initial outlay, and may help in our efforts to cut power use by 10% (see choice.com.au/10percent). Could CHOICE consider comparative power costs in future tests?

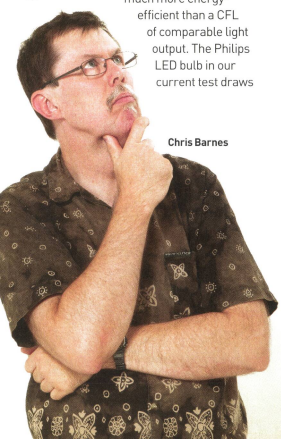
CHOICE lighting expert Chris Barnes responds:

The lamps in the July 2011 story had wattages in the 12W-15W range, most of them 15W. This is the amount of electricity they draw when turned on for one hour. Assuming an electricity tariff of 22c per kWh, running a 15W lamp for one hour will cost you one-third of one cent.

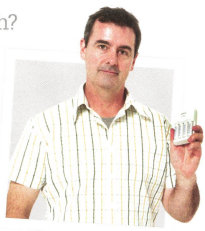
We've since conducted a new test of CFLs and have included an LED lamp. While LEDs are certainly efficient, they aren't necessarily much more energy-efficient than a CFL of comparable light output. The Philips LED bulb in our current test draws 12W and has comparable light to most of the CFLs. The real advantages of an LED lamp are that they activate instantly, have a much longer lifespan (25,000 hours or about 15 years is the claim) and are much less likely to dim over time. Also, LED lamps don't contain mercury, unlike CFLs.

In short, LED lamps will contribute to cutting your power usage, but so will CFLs.

The July 2011 story had only a brief table. A complete list of model details for that test can be found in *CHOICE*, August 2010. For details of our most recent test, see *CHOICE*, November 2011 or go to choice.com.au/cfl.



Chris Barnes



Denis Gallagher

Is there any way of having two mobile phones with the one SIM card? I would love to keep one phone in my bag where I don't forget or lose it but also have one in the house or "docked" to receive calls and SMS.

CHOICE technology expert Denis Gallagher responds:

Probably not, unless you use some kind of number forwarding service – a "virtual number" that delivers calls to two different handsets and can be answered with either. Your costs would likely be high, however, as you'd be forwarding to mobiles.

CHOICE has not tested the potential benefits or drawbacks of such a setup, so we can't make a specific recommendation.

A question came to mind after reading your story on rechargeable batteries (see *CHOICE*, October 2011). When using NiMH and Li-ion batteries, is it better to leave them on the charger all the time or wait until the battery is completely discharged before recharging them?

Denis Gallagher responds:

There is no need to completely discharge Li-ion or NiMH before recharging them, but we don't recommend continuous charging by keeping them in the charger either. If you haven't used the batteries for some time, you may want to put them in the charger before taking them out, as batteries lose charge to varying degrees over time. Li-ion batteries perform better in this regard, although some NiMH batteries hold their charge better than others when stored (as we explained in the October story). The better-performing NiMH models are usually called LSD or low self-discharge batteries. One example is the Sanyo Eneloop.

Lab Tests

Ebook readers, landline phones and vacuum cleaners – they're all on test here

46 Ebook readers
Settle in for a good read with our recommended tablets and dedicated e-readers

51 Compact cameras
The features you need and the chaff you don't

55 Blu-ray players
Do you really have to spend 10 times more to get a better player?

58 Landline phones
Why now might not be the time to cut the cord

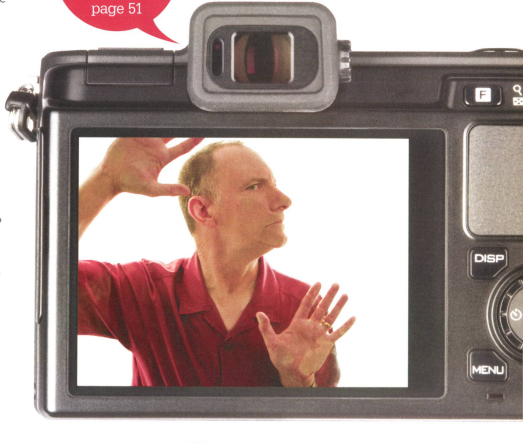
62 Microwaves
Will flatbed models take the groove out of turntable ones?

65 Vacuum cleaners
Our top-rated high-end vac is a superstar at dirt removal

68 Washing machines
We make sense of the latest autosensing programs

72 Pressure cleaners
Have a blast making your home look as good as new

Do you really need that feature? Find out on page 51



CHOICE's camera expert Chris Ruggles knows how to make good photography an easy subject

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CHOICE has its own testing laboratories where our experienced technical staff puts products through their paces. We use test methods based on Australian standards, and we develop our own to match the way consumers use a product in their homes. We buy the products we test, maintaining our independence from manufacturers, and so we know what you're faced with in the shops. Our recommendations are based on a product's quality and performance, with no hidden bias.

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CHOICE BEST BUY Our testers award a product a Best Buy if it delivers high quality at a comparatively low price. Not every test report includes Best Buys.

Best Buy

CHOICE GREEN BUY Our researchers award a Green Buy to a product that delivers good quality and environmental performance. Not every test report includes Green Buys.

Green Buy

Fit to print

Denis Gallagher books in some time with the latest e-readers.

Printed paper bound together as a book has been the preferred reading choice ever since Johannes Gutenberg re-engineered a wine press in the 15th century. Books are portable, can be read almost anywhere and can be shared with family and friends. However, compared with modern information delivery technologies, books are also expensive to make, slow to distribute and consume the planet's limited natural resources.

The electronic book reader, or e-reader, is modern technology's attempt to deliver the look and feel of the humble paperback. E-readers use virtually no energy to display a sheet of text, can store thousands of electronic titles and, unlike other computing devices, battery life for an e-reader is measured in weeks rather than hours. Like paper-based books, e-readers can be comfortably read in direct sunlight without the glare associated with a backlit screen.

Sony introduced the first e-reader using e-ink (see page 50) in 2004, the Librié EBR-1000EP, but slow performance, limited titles and high costs ensured the e-reader remained a geeky toy until Amazon introduced the Kindle in late 2007. The first Kindle was available only in the US and sold out within six hours of its release. An international version was introduced in 2009 with great success, encouraging established book retailers and distributors such as Barnes & Noble (Nook) and Borders (Kobo) to introduce their own e-readers.

E-readers use virtually no energy to display a sheet of text, can store thousands of electronic titles and their battery life is measured in weeks

What sort of e-reader are you?

If you enjoy the classics, look for an e-reader that supports the appropriate format such as EPUB, PDF, plain text or HTML, as you'll be able to download thousands of classic titles free to read and share on other ebook devices. The comparison table on page 49 lists the file formats available for each reader.

However, if you're the sort who buys the latest blockbuster as soon as it hits the shelves, choose an e-reader with an online ebook-purchasing environment such as Amazon or Barnes & Noble. Amazon has a great variety of new titles and latest releases, and the wireless purchase and instant downloading of ebook titles is smooth and efficient. However, the lack of support for the EPUB format (DRM or non-DRM) on the Amazon Kindle (the ebook reader used to purchase ebooks at Amazon.com) may be an issue for some.

WHAT TO BUY

E-READERS

77%
Sony Reader Wi-Fi Touch PRST1RC

Good points
- Highest ease of use score
- Quick battery recharge time
- Light and compact
- Includes a stylus
- Also plays audio

Bad points
- Smallest internal memory of the recommended models

76%
Amazon Kindle 6"

Good points
- Light and compact
- Free cloud storage (see page 48) for all Amazon content
- Free Kindle app is available on multiple platforms – iOS, Android, BlackBerry, Windows Phone 7, Mac, PC or web browser

Bad points
- No removable storage option, for example SD card slot

* Including shipping from Amazon

75%
Barnes & Noble Nook Color

Good points
- Nook app is available for Android, iOS, PC or Mac platforms
- Also supports video, music, productivity apps, games and colour magazine content
- 8GB internal storage

Bad points
- Battery life is not as good as e-ink e-readers

TABLET

79%
Apple iPad 2 (32GB) Wi-Fi

Good points
- Highest overall, indoor readability and bedroom readability scores
- Also supports video, music, productivity apps, games and colour magazine content
- Free cloud storage (see page 50)
- 32GB internal storage

Bad points
- Battery life is not as good as e-ink e-readers
- No removable storage option

74%
Barnes & Noble Nook Simple Touch

Good points
- Highest outdoor readability score
- Nook app is also available for Android, iOS, PC and Mac platforms
- Light and compact

Bad points
- No landscape/portrait option

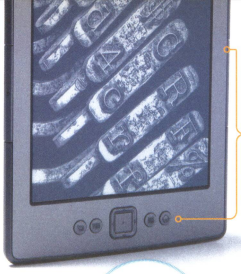
* Including shipping

73%
Amazon Kindle Wi-Fi + 3G/ Wi-Fi**

Good points
- Wi-Fi (and free 3G for $189 model) for downloading books
- 4GB internal storage

Bad points
- No support for removable storage

* Plus $12 shipping from Amazon
** Wi-Fi version is $139 plus $12 shipping



WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Controls Note where the page-turning buttons are located, as this has a big impact on long-term comfort. Hold the reader as if you were holding a book and see if the buttons are in the right place for you. Also, spend some time going through the menus to see how easy it is to access the reader's electronic features.

Screen size Our test has a range of 7", 6" (15.2cm) and 5" models, plus the Kindle DX, Apple iPad, Sony Tablet S and Lenovo Ideapad with larger screens, which some of our panellists found big and unwieldy compared with the others.

Document file formats Check ebook stores to see what format the books you want come in – the most common is EPUB. Also check if they are locked with digital

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E-READERS	PERFORMANCE							FEATURES							
	Price ($)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Readability – indoor lighting score (%)	Readability – outdoor lighting score (%)	Readability – bedroom lighting score (%)	Stated battery life	Multiple font types	Text-to-speech	Landscape / portrait mode	Wireless	Built-in speakers	Microphone	Headphone jack
# Sony Reader Wi-Fi Touch PRST1RC	179	77	92	72	70	60	14,000 page turns	✓		✓	Wi-Fi			
# Amazon Kindle 6"	123 (A)	76	87	75	71	60	1 month (Wi-Fi off), 3 weeks (Wi-Fi on)	✓		✓	Wi-Fi			
# Barnes & Noble Nook Color	249 (A)	75	83	73	62	74	8 hours	✓		✓ (B)	Wi-Fi	✓		
# Barnes & Noble Nook Simple Touch	139 (A)	74	79	75	72	67	2 months (Wi-Fi off)	✓			Wi-Fi			
Amazon Kindle Wi-Fi + 3G / Wi-Fi	189/139	73	76	75	72	66	3 weeks (Wi-Fi on)		✓	✓	Free 3G and Wi-Fi	✓	✓	✓
Amazon Kindle DX	383	71	75	78	67	59	1 week (Wi-Fi on), 2 weeks (Wi-Fi off)		✓	✓	Free 3G	✓		✓
# BeBook Club S	249	71	88	61	63	55	24,000 page turns	✓	✓	✓				✓
BeBook Neo	449	69	83	66	63	52	8000 page turns	✓		✓	Wi-Fi			✓
Borders Kobo Wireless eReader	179	69	64	77	70	70	10,000 page turns	✓		✓	Wi-Fi			
Bookeen Cybook Orizon	319	67	76	64	61	56	10,000 page turns	✓		✓	Wi-Fi			
Elonex 621EB	239	60	70	54	58	49	7000 page turns	✓		✓				✓
Bookeen Cybook Opus	269	55	64	49	50	46	8000 page turns	✓		✓				
# Laser EB7C 4G	150	54	62	49	47	49	7 hours			✓		✓		✓

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of tester ease of use (40%); readability – normal indoor lighting (20%), normal outdoor lighting (20%) and normal bedroom night lighting (20%). All ebook readers **Text-to-speech** is available on some of the models on test, but the sound is robotic. **Price** Recommended retail, as of December 2011. **TABLE NOTES #** Newly tested models. The Kindle Wi-Fi + 3G is almost identical

TABLETS	PERFORMANCE						FEATURES									
	Price ($)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Readability – indoor score (%)	Readability – outdoor score (%)	Readability – bedroom score (%)	Stated battery life (hours)	Multiple fonts types	Text-to-speech	Landscape / portrait mode	Ambient light sensor	Wireless (802.11n & Bluetooth)	Built-in speakers	Microphone	Headphone jack	USB power option	Power adapter included	Colour TFT screen
# Apple iPad 2 32GB Wi-Fi	689	79	85	79	71	77	10	✓	✓	✓ (B)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
# Lenovo Ideapad K1 Tablet (16GB)	479	63	57	67	63	70	10	✓		✓ (B)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
# Sony Tablet S (32GB)	689	61	61	64	51	69	8			✓ (B)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

USING THE TABLE See above.

rights management (DRM). Some may list a format but only support this format without DRM, so look for a listing of the DRM-locked formats it does support. Another popular ebook format is Adobe PDF, but while the format looks good under certain conditions, resizing the font can be difficult or impossible. Amazon's AZW file format is only supported on Kindle e-readers, but the Amazon Kindle application is available on PC, Mac (OS/iOS) and Android devices.

Memory capacity All the ebooks on test except the Kindles and iPad have SD or microSD memory card slots.

Music Some devices play MP3 music files so you can listen to music while reading.

SPECIFICATIONS

USB power option	Power adapter included	Touch screen	FILE SUPPORT: EPUB	HTML	RTF	PDF	AZW (Kindle)	MP3	JPG	GIF	PNG	Screen size (in)	Resolution (pixels)	Greyscale levels	Screen type	Internal storage capacity (GB)	Removable storage	Weight (g)	Dimensions (mm, H x W x D)	Contact
✓		✓	✓			✓		✓				6	800 x 600	16	E-ink Pearl	1.3	Micro SD	168	173 x 168 x 9	sony.com.au
✓				✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	6	800 x 600	16	E-ink	2	na	170	116 x 114 x 8.7	amazon.com
✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	7	1024 x 600	na	Colour TFT	8	Micro SD	448	210 x 130 x 12	barnesandnoble.com
✓		✓	✓			✓			✓	✓	✓	6	800 x 600	16	E-ink Pearl	2	Micro SD	212	165 x 127 x 12	barnesandnoble.com
✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6	600 x 800	16	E-ink Pearl	4	na	232 / 222	190 x 123 x 8.5	amazon.com
✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	9.7	1200 x 824	16	E-ink Pearl	4	na	542	264 x 182 x 9	amazon.com
✓			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	6	800 x 600	16	E-ink Pearl	2	SD	278	197 x 124 x 11.6	bebook.net.au
✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	6	600 x 800	16	E-ink	0.512	SD	308	196 x 121 x 10.6	bebook.net.au
✓			✓			✓		ns	ns		6	800 x 600	16	E-ink	1	SD	196	184 x 120 x 12	koboereader.com
✓		✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	6	600 x 800	16	E-ink	2	Micro SD	248	189 x 125 x 8	bookeen.com
✓			✓	✓		✓		✓	✓		✓	6	600 x 800	16	E-ink	1	SD	187	186 x 121 x 11	elonex.com
✓			✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	5	600 x 800	4	E-ink	1	Micro SD	141	152 x 98 x 12	bookeen.com
✓			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			7	800 x 480	na	Colour TFT	4	Micro SD	303	205 x 128 x 11	laserco.net

By default ship with an electronic version of the manual available on the device. **Landscape / portrait mode** All models support this except the Nook Simple Touch. **Multiple font types** allows you to alter the typeface. to the Kindle Wi-Fi. A couple of minor differences are noted here. **na** Not applicable. **ns** Not stated. **(A)** Plus shipping cost **(B)** Automatically changes using accelerometer

SPECIFICATIONS

Touchscreen (capacitive)	FILE SUPPORT: EPUB	AZW (Kindle app)	PDF	Screen size (in)	Resolution (pixels)	Internal storage capacity (GB)	Removable storage	Operating system	Weight (g)	Dimensions (mm, H x W x D)	Contact
✓	✓	✓	✓	9.7	1024 x 768	32 (also available in 16 & 64)	na	iOS 5	601	241 x 186 x 9	apple.com.au
✓	✓	✓	✓	10.1	1280 x 800	16 (also available in 32)	micro SD	Android 3.1	740	264 x 189 x 13.3	lenovo.com.au
✓	✓	✓	✓	9.4	1280 x 800	32 (also available in 16)	SD, SDHC	Android 3.2	598	241 x 174 x 10.1-20.6	sony.com.au

THE APPLE EFFECT

Whether or not you're a fan, there's no denying that Apple products have influenced the design of the burgeoning tablet market with the iPad. Now, e-readers are taking design cues from Apple through the popularisation, if not invention, of touch-and-swipe technology. Of the top-performing e-readers on test, only the two Kindle models use buttons instead of touch to make menu selections and turn pages, and Kindle is about to release a range of touchscreen models into the Australian market.

Realising the growing importance of ebooks, Apple has just updated its iBooks app to help improve night-time reading by providing an option for white text on a black screen to help reduce the eye strain associated with a white backlit screen.

E-readers are taking design cues from Apple through the popularisation of touch-and-swipe technology

Having a lend

Lending books is a common practice among friends and family, but what about lending your ebooks? Amazon has introduced a lending option in the US where a Kindle owner can nominate someone to read their ebook for up to 14 days. This system only operates from the US, although the receiver of the loan can reside outside the US (such as in Australia). Barnes & Noble has a similar arrangement with its Nook Color called Lendme, which has similar restrictions.

Another option is to use the same account for family members on multiple Kindles with up to six versions of a book to be shared among multiple Kindles. The downside to this is that you need to use the same user account and credit card details for all six Kindles.

If your ebook is a non-DRM version, it's a simple matter to send the file to someone else to borrow.

USER TRIAL

CHOICE's readability score is based on feedback from a panel of users who assess the feel of each newly tested model when reading an ebook, compared with reading a paper novel. Ease of navigation, including turning a page and skipping to particular parts of the ebook, are commented on and scored. Each user spends a day and a night with each e-reader so it can be used under three different types of lighting: normal indoor lighting, normal outdoor lighting and normal bedroom night-time lighting.

The reading trial included 19 users, male and female, ranging from primary-school age through to over 60. Reading preferences included users who like reading inside, those who read outside and those who mainly read at night. There was a wide range of responses based on each user's reading preferences. Some of the users were willing to live with issues such as glare for tablets in order to enjoy the other benefits tablets have to offer, while others found the need for additional lighting for night-time reading on non-backlit e-readers an acceptable compromise to get a device that is affordable, portable and easy to read for long periods. ■

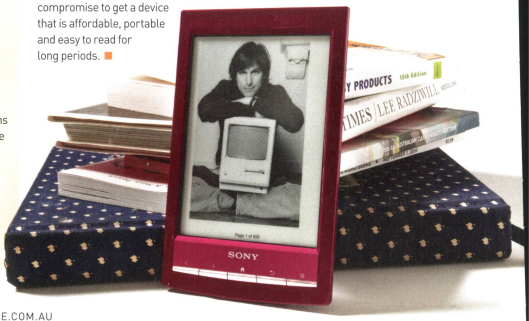
JARGON BUSTER

E-ink All e-readers on test except the tablets, Nook Color and Laser use electronic ink (e-ink) technology, which can keep an image or page of text on screen, without using any power, until the screen is refreshed by turning to the next page. Some e-ink devices quote power usage in terms of page turns, giving several thousand per charge, but all models on test last for several days or even weeks between recharges. E-ink Pearl is the latest version of e-ink, with a higher contrast.

Cloud storage is where you have your documents, music, video or any other information stored externally with access online. Access to cloud storage can be through either your internet service provider or the company providing you with the electronic device.

3G E-readers with 3G connectivity contain an internal SIM card that allows you to purchase books online. This service is provided free by Amazon, but cannot be used for anything other than basic web browsing and buying books on Amazon.

Wi-Fi Wireless local area networking (WLAN) allows you to wirelessly connect either to the internet or an online bookstore using your home network connection.



Small wonder?

Not all camera features are useful. **Chris Ruggles** explains what some of the most common can – or can't – do for you.

Nutshell

- Any feature that helps you take a better photo or get a good shot in difficult circumstances is worth having.
- Having too many useless features just adds clutter to an already complex product.

Digital cameras have many advantages over film cameras, but as with most advances in technology, the downside is increased complexity.

It's hard to know which features are helpful and which will likely never be used, and it's impossible to have a comprehensive list because features are being added with each new model. We've compiled a guide to some common features and how they help you take better photos – or not.

Definitely useful

Image stabilisation is one of the better inventions of the digital age. It helps those of us with shaky hands avoid the inevitable blurred photos and makes it possible to get good shots with very long telephoto lenses. Optical and mechanical image stabilisation types work best; electronic stabilisation usually just adds noise and is rarely successful.

Shock / weather / dust proofing

As distinct from water resistance (see below), these features are very helpful for keeping your camera out of harm's way. Moisture (including high humidity), dust in the air or a simple fall from a table can result in expensive repairs, or worse.

Water resistance usually means the camera can be submerged to a specified depth. This is handy if you spend a lot of time at the beach or by a pool. Some even come with a manometer, so you can tell if you're getting close to the depth limit. However, as you go deeper there is less light and exposures will become longer or the ISO rating will have to increase, which could mean more noise in the picture.

Focus tracking allows you to decide what to focus on and then keeps that object in focus as it moves about within the frame. This can be extremely handy when photographing children, animals or any other subject that is likely to move erratically.

Preset photo modes (party, night, snow etc) make it possible to take well-exposed images in difficult situations. However, you need to remember to turn them off or the camera may produce some very odd results next time you get it out. ▸ (p54)

ISTOCKPHOTO

WHAT TO BUY
The compact cameras here are our top-performers with overall scores of 70% or more. CHOICE PLUS members can access full details for all 96 cameras in our current test, including the comparison table, at choice.com.au/digitalcameras.

76%
Panasonic Lumix DMC-FZ47, $649

Good points
- HDMI connection built in

Bad points
- Images tend to be pale and noisy in low light conditions
- Diffuse reflections from side lighting in tele mode
- Difficult to focus manually with viewfinder or monitor
- Audio has button snap and grinding noises when zooming or focusing in video mode

71%
Canon Ixus 220 HS, $249

Good points
- HDMI connection built in
- Good video quality

Bad points
- Noticeable colour aberrations in wide and tele modes
- Images in daylight conditions lack sharpness
- Monitor in playback mode lacks resolution and has a visible pixel structure

71%
Casio Exilim EX H30, $399

Good points
- Little shutter delay

Bad points
- Monitor contrast is very low in bright conditions and further reduced with additional noise in poor lighting conditions
- Video picture colours are pale, lack saturation and there's some noise in low-light conditions
- Audio has humming noises when zooming in video mode

71%
Nikon Coolpix S8100, $399

Good points
- HDMI connection built in
- Good video quality

Bad points
- Noticeable colour aberrations and vignetting in tele mode
- Monitor lacks contrast and has a grey-brown tinge in poor light conditions
- Video image has too much contrast

71%
Nikon Coolpix S100, $349

Good points
- HDMI connection built in
- Little shutter delay

Bad points
- Some edge effects noticeable in tele mode
- Front slider for lens protection with power-on function is difficult to use
- Has no mechanical operation buttons except release

74%
Nikon Coolpix P300, $499

Good points
- HDMI connection built in
- Good video quality

Bad points
- Noticeable colour aberrations in wide mode
- Pictures indoors without flash have slight green tint
- Monitor has noticeable reflections in bright conditions
- Audio has humming noises when zooming in video mode

73%
Casio Exilim EX ZR10, $299

Good points
- HDMI connection built in
- Little shutter delay
- Good video quality

Bad points
- Pictures indoors without flash have slight blue tint
- Monitor has noticeable reflections and contrast is reduced in bright conditions

73%
Nikon Coolpix L120, $299

Good points
- HDMI connection built in
- Good video quality

Bad points
- Noticeable colour aberrations in wide and tele modes
- Pictures indoors without flash have slight green tint
- Pictures tend to be noisy in low-light conditions
- Monitor has noticeable reflections and contrast is reduced in bright conditions

72%
Nikon Coolpix S9100, $449

Good points
- HDMI connection built in
- Little shutter delay
- Good video quality

Bad points
- Sharpness is slightly reduced in tele mode
- Pictures indoors without flash have increased saturation in skin tones
- Pictures are slightly blurred in wide mode
- Monitor contrast and brightness are reduced in poor lighting conditions

71%
Panasonic Lumix DMC TZ18, $399

Good points
- Little shutter delay

Bad points
- Pictures indoors without flash have reduced sharpness and yellow tint
- Monitor has some reflections and contrast is reduced in bright conditions
- Video images lack brightness

71%
Sony Cyber-shot DSC HX9V, $449

Good points
- Dual memory card slot (Memory Stick Duo and SD)
- Little shutter delay
- HDMI connection built in

Bad points
- Most function buttons are small and difficult to use. The power-on and movie mode buttons are poorly positioned

70%
Fujifilm FinePix F550EXR, $449

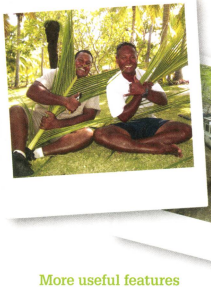
Good points
- HDMI connection built in
- Little shutter delay

Bad points
- Monitor contrast is reduced with additional noise in poor lighting conditions
- Video picture colours are overexposed and the auto-focus is unstable in daylight
- Flash pops up every time the camera is switched on. This cannot be disabled

70%
Nikon Coolpix S8200, $349

Good points
- HDMI connection built in

Bad points
- Slow to focus in low-light conditions
- Monitor has some reflections and contrast is reduced in bright conditions
- Video pictures are dark, with inaccurate reds in low light
- Audio is poor overall and has humming noises when zooming in video mode



More useful features

Digital zoom used to be a pretty useless feature, resulting in degraded images. With the increase in megapixels in most cameras it's now possible to use some moderate cropping, which is what digital zoom does, and still get a decent photo.

Movie and sound recording Some higher-end stills cameras can rival dedicated video cameras for moving image quality. The main drawback is the lack of video-specific features such as powered zoom or continuous exposure in video mode, but these are being addressed. In our tests we check to see if the zoom, focus or other controls interfere with the sound quality in video mode. Sadly they often do, resulting in grinding or loud snapping noises.

Battery level warns you when it's time to replace or recharge the battery. Some are reasonably detailed and accurate, while others give very little warning and are hard to use. Even with recent improvements in battery life for cameras this is still an essential feature.

Maybe useful

Face recognition can be handy if you often take pictures of people. Most cameras with this feature are set to expose for the closest face and try to get as much depth of field as possible if they recognise more than one face in the frame. In some circumstances this can result in poor exposure or increased noise in the image.

Image stitching comes in a number of forms, but essentially the idea is to take a number of images and join them seamlessly into one panorama. Results can vary and external software will often produce a better result.

HDR stands for high dynamic range and, as the name implies, is used to produce images in cases where you'd otherwise have to decide whether you want detail in the shadows and accept blown-out highlights, or vice versa. Although this can be done with some cameras, it can also be done by taking a number of images at different exposures and overlaying them using software on a computer.

Touchscreens work well with phones and other mobile devices, but their usefulness on a digital camera is debatable. It's only helpful to be able to touch a point on the monitor to focus if the camera reacts quickly, and accessing controls via menus is usually slower than via a dedicated button.

Wind filters are designed to reduce wind noise when taking video footage. Definitely a good idea if they work, but some may interfere with ambient noise as well, leaving you with some odd sounds.

HDMI connections make it possible to plug your camera directly into a TV or other HDMI device so you can view your video footage and stills at the highest resolution the screen can handle.

Image ratios Most high-end cameras can record in more than one ratio. Widescreen or 16:9 is the most common for TVs and is useful for shooting movies, but they'll also do 4:3, which is what most compact cameras default to, and 3:2, which is closer to 35mm film.

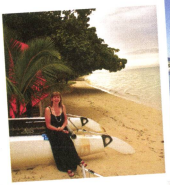
GPS makes it possible to pinpoint exactly where you are when you take a photograph. This can be helpful if you take lots of photos when travelling, and some people like to share this information via photo sharing sites such as Picasa or Flickr. Be careful, though, as this feature can significantly decrease battery life.

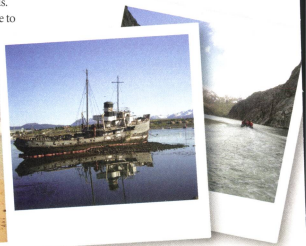
3D requires a 3D screen and special glasses to see the effect, which can add an unnatural feel to an image.

Touchscreens work well with phones and other mobile devices, but their usefulness on a digital camera is debatable

Monitors can come with some useful tools. **Grids** and **levels** help with your composition and keep your horizons level, while **data displays** give you information on what the camera is doing to help you decide whether to take control to get a different effect. Some cameras even come with a front monitor to accurately frame that self-portrait in front of the Eiffel Tower.

An **inbuilt projector** and **compass** are novel ideas, but probably of limited practical use for most people. ■





Feeling Blu

Blu-ray is pushing the DVD out of the living room, says **Chris Ruggles.**

Since all Blu-ray players also play DVDs, buying a Blu-ray player makes a lot of sense, especially given the cheapest one on test here, the Philips BDP3200/79, costs about the same as a DVD player ($129). You'll pay seven times that amount for the Oppo player (see page 56), but you can save hundreds by sticking with Philips and opting for its top-rating BDP5200/79 model ($199), which performs slightly better overall at a fraction of the price.

You'd expect more expensive models to have more features and offer greater flexibility, but this isn't always the case. Fortunately, all the players on test can be upgraded via the internet, which helps keep them up to date with emerging technologies such as changing HDMI protocols and 3D functionality.

Nutshell

- All players on test deliver very good pictures and sound, so buy on features, ease of use and price.
- Long load times and poor error correction will result in frustration. Look for higher scores in both areas.

Getting connected

The following connection options are all for showing a Blu-ray movie, but if your TV can't handle at least a component connection, there's no difference in video quality using Blu-ray instead of a standard DVD player.

Composite uses a single yellow RCA connector. All players on test have one except the Onkyo BD-SP309, but the image quality will be well below what Blu-ray can provide.

Component provides up to HD (1080p) quality if the TV can display the resolution. Three video cables are required to show the video, and you need a separate cable for sound. All players on test have one except the LG, Onkyo BD-SP309, Samsung BD-D5300, Panasonic, Philips and Toshiba models.

HDMI (high-definition multimedia interface) is a digital connection for both video and sound in one cable and is the only connection that can accommodate the upscaling of video to a higher resolution. All on test have HDMI.

Toslink (optical) and **RCA (coaxial) digital audio outputs** provide a digital audio connection. Either is good if you can't use HDMI to connect your Blu-ray player to your home theatre system.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

DVD upscaling allows you to view your current DVD titles in an enhanced video mode. The picture is interpolated to either 1080i or 1080p, so your DVD movie looks very much like HD. However, you need an HDMI connection and a TV that can display HD. All players on test can do this to a reasonable quality.

The **remote control** should have buttons that are sized, shaped and spaced so you can easily find and press them individually.

USB ports allow you to plug in storage devices to take advantage of extra BD-Live content from the web, play formats other than DVD and BD or attach a wireless dongle. Having two is handy.

Memory cards can be taken directly from a camera or similar device and plugged into some players. Otherwise, you can use them in the same way you would a USB storage device.

Internet connection Some models use this to upgrade the player's firmware or operating software via the internet, giving you added features and functionality.

Video streaming means you can play video stored on another device via your Blu-ray player.

3D-ready means the player will recognise and play a 3D disc, but you'll need a 3D-capable TV too.

WHAT TO BUY

80%
Philips BDP5200/79

Best Buy

Good points
- Good value for money
- Claims to play most discs and formats (not DVD audio or SACD)
- Very low standby energy consumption
- SD memory card slot

Bad points
- Requires extra memory for BD-Live

79%
Oppo BDP-93

Good points
- 7.1-channel analog audio outputs
- Will play most discs and formats
- 2GB internal memory
- Pro kit version will play DVDs and BD discs from any region
- HDMI cable included
- Very low standby energy consumption

Bad points
- Relatively expensive

79%
Sony BDP-S780

Good points
- Claims to play most discs and formats (not DVD audio, SACD or Video CD)
- Very low standby energy consumption

Bad points
- Requires extra memory for BD-Live
- Can be slow to load DVDs

ABOUT THE REST

All players with overall scores of 70% or more are a good buy at the right price.

Both **Pioneer** models are slow to load a basic DVD and you have to eject the disc if you want to change settings. Neither has DLNA connection, nor does the **Sony BDP-S380**, **BDP-S480** and **Toshiba** models.

Players with scores below 70% for error correction (see table, far right) are likely to have trouble with greasy fingerprints as well as scratches, so they may not be a good choice if you have children. We included a sequence shot on a high-quality consumer video camera in AVCHD format and played it back via CD-R on the player. All players produced excellent picture quality except the **Samsung BD-D6900A** and **Pioneer** models, whose motion sequences aren't smooth.

The **Toshiba's** images are soft and lack detail. ■

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		PERFORMANCE	
	Price ($)	Overall score (%)	Ease of use score (%)
# Philips BDP5200/79	199	80	72
Oppo BDP-93	950	79	82
# Sony BDP-S780	379	79	71
# Samsung BD-D6500	279	78	70
# Yamaha BD-S671	349	78	74
LG BD660	199	77	75
# Samsung BD-D5500	229	76	70
# Sony BDP-S580	229	76	71
Sony BDP-S480	179	76	71
# Samsung BD-D5300	199	75	66
# Philips BDP3200/79	129	74	72
Denon DBP-1611UD	699	73	68
Marantz UD5005	795	73	65
Panasonic DMP-BD75	149	72	66
Panasonic DMP-BDT110	219	72	67
# Panasonic DMP-BDT310	349	72	67
Samsung BD-D6900A	349	72	68
Sony BDP-S380	149	70	71
# Toshiba BDX1200	159	67	66
# Onkyo BD-SP309	599	63	62
Pioneer BDP-LX54	599	57	61
Pioneer BDP-430	499	57	60

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of ease of use (30%). **TABLE NOTES #** Newly tested model. **(A)** Wireless protocol not stated.

78%
Yamaha BD-S671

Good points
- Claims to play most discs and formats (not DVD audio, SACD or Video CD)
- Very low standby energy consumption

Bad points
- Video component output limited to 576i
- Requires extra memory for BD-Live
- No wireless option

78%
Samsung BD-D6500

Good points
- Good value for money
- Claims to play most discs and formats (not DVD audio, SACD or Video CD)

Bad points
- Requires extra memory for BD-Live

77%
LG BD660

Good points
- Good value for money
- Claims to play most discs and formats (not DVD audio, SACD or Video CD)

Bad points
- Requires extra memory for BD-Live
- No wireless option
- Won't play AVCHD files on USB

						FEATURES							SPECIFICATIONS		
score (%)	Versatility score (%)	Load time score (%)	Error correction score (%)	Power consumption score (%)	Power consumption (W, disc spinning / standby)	Memory card type	Wireless	Update via internet	Video streaming	Internal memory (GB)	DLNA	3D-ready	USB ports	Dimensions (cm, W x H x D)	Weight (kg)
6	87	55	100	79	11.7 / 0	SD	a/b/g/n	Wired, wireless, USB	✓		✓	✓	Front	43.5 x 4.3 x 20.7	1.65
5	77	56	100	55	18.4 / 0.3		b/g/n	Wired, wireless, USB, disc	✓	2	✓	✓	Front, rear	42.9 x 8 x 30.5	4.76
3	85	55	100	77	10.8 / 0.2		b/g/n	Wired, wireless	✓		✓	✓	Front, rear	43.8 x 4.8 x 19	1.8
4	85	46	100	85	11.2 / 0.6		b/g/n	Wired, USB, disc, wireless	✓		✓	✓	Front	42.8 x 3.8 x 20.6	1.7
3	74	44	100	90	11.7 / 0.1			Wired, USB or disc	✓		✓	✓	Front, rear	43.5 x 8.5 x 25	2.9
4	69	41	100	95	10.8 / 0.1			Wired	✓		✓	✓	Front	42.8 x 4.6 x 19	3.5
4	74	44	100	89	10.3 / 0.6		✓ (A)	Wired, USB, disc	✓		✓	✓	Front, rear	42.8 x 4.5 x 21	1.7
3	79	42	100	81	9.1 / 0		b/g/n	Wired, wireless	✓		✓	✓	Front, rear	42.8 x 3.4 x 19	1.56
3	67	53	100	79	8.6 / 0		✓ (A)	Wired, wireless	✓		✓	✓	Front, rear	42.8 x 3.4 x 19	1.56
4	67	45	100	94	8.4 / 0.4		✓ (A)	Wired, USB, disc	✓		✓		Front, rear	43.1 x 4.5 x 20.4	1.7
4	37	57	100	97	10.2 / 0.1		✓ (A)	Wired, wireless, USB	✓				Front, rear	43.5 x 4.3 x 20.7	1.65
5	64	50	100	63	17.3 / 0.1			Wired	✓	1	✓	✓	Front	43.4 x 10.7 x 31.9	4.2
5	67	47	100	68	16.4 / 0.1			Wired	✓	1	✓	✓	Front	43.8 x 10.7 x 32.3	4.39
6	54	70	56	89	7.7 / 0			Wired, disc	✓		✓		Front	42.8 x 3.5 x 19	1.43
4	64	41	84	90	6.9 / 0	SD, SDHC, SDXC	✓ (A)	Wired, disc	✓		✓	✓	Front, rear	42.8 x 3.5 x 19	1.42
4	78	54	41	89	9.1 / 0	SD, SDHC, SDXC	a/b/g/n	Wired, wireless	✓		✓	✓	Front, rear	42.8 x 3.5 x 19	1.6
8	84	52	88	48	16.4 / 1.7		✓ (A)	Wired, wireless, USB, disc	✓	1.03	✓	✓	Front	43 x 3.7 x 25.6	1.8
3	34	45	100	83	8.1 / 0		✓ (A)	Wired, wireless	✓				Front, rear	42.8 x 3.4 x 19	1.54
7	19	46	100	94	10.2 / 0.3			USB, disc					Front	43.5 x 4.2 x 19	1.5
1	49	21	57	98	7.7 / 0.1			Wired or USB	✓		✓	✓	Front, rear	43.5 x 5.5 x 20	1.8
5	37	9	67	81	13.2 / 0.2		✓ (A)	Wired				✓	Front, rear	42 x 7.25 x 22.8	3.3
5	37	9	67	81	13.2 / 0.2		✓ (A)	Wired				✓	Front, rear	42 x 6.8 x 22.8	2.5

picture quality (20%), versatility (15%), load time (15%), error correction (10%) and power consumption (10%). **Features** See What to Look For, page 55. **Price** Recommended retail, as of November 2011.

Flat chat

There are now even more options for your next cordless phone, as **Denis Gallagher** explains.

Every year we hear about the death of the landline phone, yet every year Australians buy about a million handsets – a trend that looks set to continue.

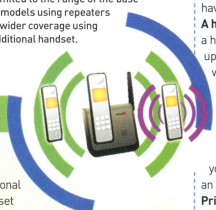
Although there are now more mobile phones in operation in Australia than people, general satisfaction with mobile call quality and network reception remains low. "I can't hear you properly on this landline, can you please call me on the mobile?" is seldom heard. If you want good sound quality and a conversation lasting more than a few minutes, the landline is still a very good communication option. As well, landline calls to most other local landline numbers remain untimed, allowing you to sit back and have a good chat without thinking about the flag fall or 30-second call rate.

Attractive bundling deals offered by Optus and Telstra, together with the need to have a landline to access the internet, mean the home phone will be an important part of the communication mix for most people for some time to come. Some of the latest models on test offer new features such as Bluetooth support as well as improvements in range and sound quality. All use the DECT digital system operating on the 1.8-1.9GHz band, which means low risk of interference with your wireless home network or wireless computer devices.

Repeating yourself

While multiple handsets increase the versatility of your home phone, they don't normally increase its range. The range for a cordless phone is usually determined by the position of the base unit, so if the range for a phone is 100 metres, adding an additional handset to the phone mix will not increase the range to 200 metres.

Uniden has introduced cordless phones with significantly increased range through the use of standalone repeaters or an additional handset base with the ability to re-transmit the signal beyond the original station. In this test, the Uniden Elite 9145+1 includes a repeater box to extend the range of the handset. The repeater is placed between the base and additional handset base, and is also available as an option for Uniden Elite and XDECT R0 series phones. The Uniden R055 includes the re-transmission feature in the additional handsets, and we tested the model with two additional handsets to see if the performance matched the advertising (though our range test is measured from the base unit for consistency). We were very impressed with the range to be gained using the additional handsets on the Elite and R055 phones, and would recommend this setup if you need coverage beyond 200 metres.



Phones without the repeating function are limited to the range of the base while models using repeaters enjoy wider coverage using the additional handset.

Nutshell

- While the bells and whistles are nice, choose a phone that gives you the best sound and range at a reasonable price.
- One phone on test lets you make an emergency call in a blackout.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Volume If you're hard of hearing, look for a phone with extensive volume adjustment on the handset and a high handset speaker and ringer volume.

Large, clearly marked keys and a **backlit keypad** can help when making calls in low light. All models on test have a backlit keypad.

A headset jack, where you can plug in a headset with a microphone, frees up your hands to continue other tasks while carrying out a conversation. All models on test also have hands-free.

Call waiting lets you know when someone is trying to call you while talking to someone else. Check with your phone network to see if there is an additional charge for this service.

Privacy mode prevents anyone from listening in on a call from the other handset. All phones except the Telstras have this feature.

It's an emergency!

A cordless phone's inability to operate in a power outage can be a concern. Thankfully, you now have a few options to enjoy cordless freedom as well as peace of mind. The top-performing Panasonic KX-TG6622ALB is the first ever cordless phone able to call in a blackout. The Uniden Elite 9145+1 and Panasonic KX-TG6461ALT+1 also work in an outage as each has a corded phone as a base station plus a cordless handset.

Incoming/barring provides a level of control should you not want to accept calls from certain companies or individuals. A **dial pad** and **speaker on the base unit** allow you to make and take calls when you can't locate the handset. The Panasonic KX-TG6561ALT and Uniden R055+1 is a cordless phone with an additional keypad and speaker on the base.

Hearing aid-compatible (Telecoil or T-coil) support allows the caller's voice to be directly fed from the phone to your hearing aid, helping to filter out background noise when listening through the handset speaker. Only the Uniden models have a T-coil.

Night mode You can set the phone not to ring during a specified time period – very handy for a good night's sleep.

Paging from the base to the handset can be handy if you leave the phone lying around the house. All phones on test have this ability.

Support for Bluetooth mobiles The two phones that support Bluetooth mobile phones (see table, page 60) allow you to add your mobile phone to your home phone as if it were an additional handset.

Batteries While all cordless phones should come with rechargeable batteries, some models can use other AAA NiMH rechargeable batteries, which cost less than battery packs and are readily available.

Conference call lets you allow users on the extra handset to join a phone conversation where all parties can hear an open conversation. All models on test have this.

WHAT TO BUY

81%
Panasonic KX-TG6622ALB

Good points
- First cordless phone on the market able to operate during a blackout
- Best overall range performance on test
- Very easy to use

Bad points
- Second-worst battery life on test, although this won't be an issue if you place the handset in the base when not in use

81%
Uniden XDECT R055+1

Good points
- Very easy to use
- Keypad on base allows you to make and take calls using the speakerphone
- Very good overall range, with even greater range when using the repeater feature
- Supports hearing aids that use a T-coil

Bad points
- Most expensive phone on test

80%
Siemens Gigaset A400 A Duo

Good points
- Very easy to use
- Excellent battery performance

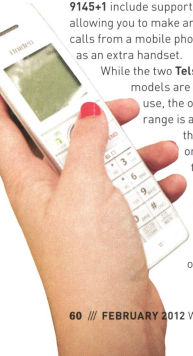
Bad points
- Product not as easy to find for sale as Uniden or Panasonic models
- Lowest handset ringer loudness on test

ABOUT THE REST

The **Panasonic KX-TG6461ALT** and **Uniden Elite 9145+1** are good options for those who want a wired phone and extra cordless handset package, with the Panasonic delivering the best sound quality on test.

The **Uniden Elite 9135+1** and **9145+1** include support for Bluetooth, allowing you to make and take local calls from a mobile phone operating as an extra handset.

While the two **Telstra** models are easy to use, the overall range is among the lowest on test. Our triallists also found the overall sound quality is not as clear as others on test. ■



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	Price ($)	Overall score (%)	PERFORMANCE: Sound quality score (%)	Range score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Battery life score (%)	Answering machine score (%)	Talk time (hours)
Panasonic KX-TG6622ALB	100	81	73	93	83	71	79	15
Uniden XDECT R055+1 (A)	230	81	72	87	81	88	80	18
Siemens Gigaset A400 A Duo	110	80	73	77	83	99	80	23.5
Siemens Gigaset E500A (single handset)	180	80	70	83	78	100	75	24
Panasonic KX-TG6561ALT (single handset)	90	79	72	85	83	81	71	19.5
Uniden DECT 3035+1	100	79	70	92	73	85	80	17
Uniden Elite 9135+1	160	78	67	87	79	83	84	16
Panasonic KX-TG6461ALT (1 corded & 1 cordless handset)	150	77	75	73	84	81	81	19.5
Uniden Elite 9145+1 (1 corded & 1 cordless handset)	170	77	70	83	78	82	79	15.5
Telstra 9150 Twin DECT Cordless Phone	60	69	63	70	74	75	63	12
Telstra 9450 Twin DECT 6.0 Cordless Phone	87	66	63	70	73	55	78	12

USING THE TABLE All models on test deliver remote access for messages and all have caller ID (if supported on the phone's network). All or brand. Answering machine performance is scored but does not contribute to overall score to allow direct comparison with landline phones **Price** Recommended retail, as of December 2011. **TABLE NOTES (A)** Product on test includes two handsets (R055+2) available for $399.

80%

Siemens Gigaset E500A*

Good points

- Best battery performance on test
- Very good overall range performance
- Loud base ringer

Bad points

- Product not as easy to find for sale as Uniden or Panasonic models
- Among the lowest sound levels for earpiece volume

* Single handset

79%

Panasonic KX-TG6561ALT*

Good points

- Keypad on base allows you to make and take calls using the speakerphone
- Very easy to use
- Very good range

Bad points

- Among the lowest sound levels for handset ringing

* Single handset

79%

Uniden DECT 3035+1

Good points

- Excellent overall range performance
- Loudest model on test when using earpiece
- Supports hearing aids that use a T-coil

Bad points

- Not as easy to use as top-performing models

FEATURES								SPECIFICATIONS															
Headset port	Bluetooth handset support	Night mode	Incoming call barring	Hearing aid compatible (T-coil support)	Cord and cordless combination	Wall mountable	Recommended initial charging time (hours)	Power consumption (W, base only)	Power consumption (W, base and phone)	Range (m)	Handset ringer loudness (dB)	Maximum volume for handset speaker (dB)	Maximum earpiece volume (dB)	Base ringer maximum volume (dB)	Handsets supported	Total phonebook entries	Total ringtones	Polyphonic ringtones	Battery type (all NiMH)	Answering machine recording time (mins)	Contact
		✓	✓			✓	7	0.4	0.5	220	66	71	73	75	6	100	30	20	2 x AAA	18	panasonic.com.au
✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	15	0.7	1.3	170	72	67	76	75	6	100	7	5	Pack	15	uniden.com.au
		✓				✓	6	0.3	0.4	140	62	70	73	72	4	80	20	13	2 x AAA	25	gigaset.com.au
✓		✓				✓	8	0.3	0.4	130	74	76	69	80	4	150	21	12	2 x AAA	25	gigaset.com.au
				✓		✓	7	0.3	0.4	190	63	72	72	73	6	100	15	10	2 x AAA	20	panasonic.com.au
		✓		✓			15	1.2	1.6	200	71	68	77	76	6	100	7	5	Pack	ns	uniden.com.au
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15	0.6	1.1	190	74	66	74	73	10 (B)	200 (C)	10	6	Pack	16	uniden.com.au
				✓		✓	7	0	0.8	90	68	70	73	72	6	100	15	10	2 x AAA	20	panasonic.com.au
✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	15	0	0.8	170	72	66	72	72	10 (B)	200 (C)	10	6	Pack	16	uniden.com.au
							14	0.7	0.7	90	77	76	76	81	5	50	10	5	2 x AAA	15	telstrahomephones.com.au
						✓	12	0.7	0.9	80	74	75	75	88	5	100	15	5	Pack	28	telstrahomephones.com.au

models are tested with an extra handset, as multi-handset phones are found in many homes. Models that are only available as a single handset are tested using an additional handset of the same model without an answering machine. **Scores** The overall score is made up of sound quality (35%), range (30%), ease of use (20%) and battery life (15%). Talk times are rounded to the nearest 30 minutes. **(B)** Up to six range extenders as well. **(C)** Additionally, phonebooks from up to four paired mobile phones can be downloaded to the phone; each downloaded phonebook can have up to 1500 entries.

Nutshell

➤ *You don't have to spend big for a good microwave – three of our recommended models cost less than $200.*

Hitting the turntables

A flatbed microwave is convenient, but is it serious competition to turntable models? **Rebecca Gatto** finds out.

If you're sick of always having to remove and clean your microwave's turntable, the answer to your prayers may have just arrived. The Panasonic NNSF550W is a flatbed microwave, meaning it does not have a rotating plate inside. It also has more space for fitting rectangular or larger dishes, and it's easier to clean.

Most microwaves cycle between periods of power and no heat. By contrast, this Panasonic uses inverter technology, which means it can run continuously at half power to cook more evenly, at least in theory. Panasonic is the only manufacturer offering flatbed microwaves; however, this was the weakest-performing Panasonic in our tests despite being a good overall performer.

All the newly tested microwaves cook fresh vegetables and defrost a chicken well, and most perform well for defrosting mince. However, many struggle to reheat solid foods. Because solid foods can't be stirred, it's difficult for microwaves to obtain an even and consistent result, leaving some areas much cooler than others.

The brands in our What to Buy list (page 64) ranked highly in our 2011 reliability survey (see *CHOICE*, March 2011). Sharp didn't rank as highly as LG, Panasonic or Samsung, but loyalty to the brand is high, with 91% of owners saying they'd be likely to buy a Sharp again.

Safe or scary?

Microwaves are a safe method of food preparation if used correctly, and the food is just as nutritious (more so in some cases) as foods cooked in an oven or on a cooktop.

The generation of microwaves stops as soon as you cut the power off and open the door. Microwaves don't remain in the food or make the food or microwave oven radioactive. All microwaves sold in Australia must have passed specific requirements about leakage. However, leakage is possible if you have a poorly fitting or damaged door, so have it inspected by a qualified technician if in doubt. And if your microwave is about eight to 10 years old and has some damage to the door or door seals, trade it in for a new one.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Visibility A bright interior light and large, transparent viewing window lets you check your food as it cooks.
Controls Look for easy-to-use controls and good instructions on the display.
Cleaning Check there aren't too many holes or gaps inside the microwave, or crevices on the outside that can trap food and grease.

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	COSTS		PERFORMANCE
	Price ($)	Annual running cost ($)	Overall score (%)
Panasonic NN-ST557W	199	13.94	88
# **LG** MS3840SR	219	13.09	87
# **Sharp** R395YS	299	17.17	86
# **LG** MS3840SRSK	249	12.91	85
LG MS2548GR	179	11.39	85
Panasonic NN-ST680S	359	11.91	85
Samsung ME6104ST	249	11.66	82
# **Sharp** R200YW	109	8.30	82
# **Sanyo** EMS8588V	259	11.93	79
Sanyo EMS156AW	149	9.00	79
# **Breville** BMO300	230	9.76	78
Whirlpool VT266SL	429	9.69	78
# **Panasonic** NN-ST671S	329	12.14	77
Omega OM250XA	269	11.13	77
# **Samsung** ME6124ST	299	10.96	76
Breville BMO100	190	10.88	73
Sharp R230LS	182	9.54	73
# **Panasonic** NN-SF550W	229	12.20	71
Breville Ikon BMO200	290	10.67	71
LG MS2346S	159	10.58	71
# **Midea** EM925ESA	179	10.61	68
Westinghouse WMG281SF	429	10.49	68
# **Omega** OA138X	399	13.55	66
Samsung MW83Z	149	9.44	62

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of cooking **cost** is calculated on the energy used reheating a plated meal for 365 days score is based on using the auto-defrost function. The LG performed poorly

Size Make sure your cooking dishes will fit into the microwave. Ideally there should be about 10cm of space around the outside of the oven for ventilation, plus 20cm above it.

Quick boost/start starts the oven, usually by pressing a single button. With most microwaves, the cooking time increases in one or half-minute increments if you press the button again.

Time-adjust during cooking allows you to increase or decrease the time programmed during cooking. Most models on test have this feature.

Sensor programs take automatic functions one step further by measuring vapours emitted during cooking to control the cooking time.

Multi-stage programming Microwaves with this feature can be programmed to perform a sequence of functions, such as defrost, cook and then leave to stand.

To find out how we test microwaves, log on to **choice.com.au/microwaves**

				FEATURES								SPECIFICATIONS					
Cooking broccoli score (%)	Defrosting mince meat score (%)	Defrosting chicken score (%)	Reheating quiche score (%)	Sensor cook/reheat	Auto-cook	Auto-reheat	Adjust time during cooking	Number of power levels	Delayed start or preset cooking	Kitchen timer (stand-alone)	Multi-stage cooking	Volume (L, measured)	Wattage (W)	External dimensions (cm, W x H x D, measured)	Usable cavity dimensions (cm, W x H x D, measured)	Useable shelf (turntable) diameter (cm)	Contact
100	100	90	82		✓	✓		6	✓	✓	✓	25	1100	51 x 30 x 38 (B)	36 x 20 x 35	34	panasonic.com.au
100	92	90	81		✓	✓	✓	10		✓	✓	39	1100	56 x 32 x 43	40 x 24 x 41	35	lge.com.au
100	100	80	81	✓	✓		✓	10	✓	✓	✓	33	1200	52 x 31 x 44	37 x 24 x 37	31	sharp.net.au
100	95	90	70	✓	✓	✓	✓	10		✓	✓	39	1100	56 x 32 x 43	40 x 24 x 41	35	lge.com.au
100 (A)	100	90	66		✓		✓	11			✓	25	850	51 x 30 x 40	33 x 21 x 36	31	lge.com.au
100	100	90	66	✓			✓	10		✓	✓	32	1100	52 x 30 x 41	38 x 23 x 37	34	panasonic.com.au
100	100	90	76	✓	✓		✓	5		✓	✓	27	1000	52 x 30 x 39	35 x 22 x 35	30	samsung.com.au
100	100	80	57		✓	✓		10		✓	✓	23	800	45x 26 x 35	31 x 23 x 32	22	sharp.net.au
100	100	80	50		✓	✓	✓(C)	10		✓	✓	34	1100	52 x 32 x 42	36 x 24 x 39	29	sanyo.com.au
100	86	90	43		✓	✓		11		✓	✓	17	800	45 x 26 x 37	32 x 17 x 32	23	sanyo.com.au
100	94	90	60		✓	✓		5	✓		✓	34	1100	52 x 32 x 45	36 x 24 x 39	30	breville.com.au
100	76	90	93				✓	6		✓	✓	25	800 (850 for grill)	52 x 30 x 44	34 x 20 x 37	27	whirlpool.com.au
100	80	90	66	✓			✓	10		✓	✓	32	1100	52 x 31 x 39	36 x 24 x 37	32	panasonic.com.au
100	88	80	86					5				25	900	51 x 30 x 41	35 x 22 x 33	31	omegaappliances.com.au
80	80	90	91	✓	✓	✓	✓	10		✓	✓	30	1000	52 x 30 x 42	37 x 22 x 37	30	samsung.com.au
100	68	70	73		✓	✓		5			✓	23	900	52 x 34 x 43 (B)	33 x 20 x 35	31	breville.com.au
100	72	80	52		✓	✓	✓	5		✓	✓	20	800	46 x 28 x 37 (B)	31 x 20 x 33	27	sharp.net.au
100	53	90	58		✓	✓		6		✓		28	1000	52 x 33 x 41	36 x 23 x 34	na	panasonic.com.au
100	100	70	36		✓	✓	✓	5			✓	29	900	52 x 33 x 44	34 x 23 x 37	31	breville.com.au
100	67	70	40		✓		✓	10		✓	✓	20	800	51 x 29 x 39 (B)	30 x 20 x 34	28	lge.com.au
100	78	80	26		✓	✓		5	✓		✓	24	900	51 x 31 x 41	33 x 20 x 37	31	mideabrand.com
100	70	70	54		✓	✓		5	✓		✓	28	900	51 x 31 x 44	33 x 23 x 37	29	westinghouse.com.au
100	52	70	34		✓	✓	✓	10		✓	✓	34	1000	56 x 34 x 47	37 x 23 x 40	32	omegaappliances.com.au
100	50	70	34		✓	✓	✓	6		✓		23	850	49 x 28 x 36 (B)	33 x 21 x 33	28	samsung.com.au

erformance (70%, made up of four test scores weighted equally) and ease of use (30%). **Features** See What to Look For, above. **Wattage** The higher the wattage, the faster the food will cook. **Annual running** r 22c/kWh and adding the annual standby cost. **Price** Recommended retail, as of December 2011. **TABLE NOTES #** Newly tested model. **na** Not applicable – this is a flatbed model with no turntable. **(A)** This hen using the express defrost function. **(B)** Claimed external dimensions. **(C)** am/pm. This button is used for the clock to change from am to pm and also used to increase and decrease time during cooking.

IST/CHP/CH210

WHAT TO BUY

NEW MODELS

87%
LG MS3840SR

Good points
- Excellent for cooking broccoli and defrosting mince and chicken
- Very good for reheating
- Easy to use and clean
- Auto-cook and reheat functions with a large selection of auto-cooking functions
- Multi-stage cooking
- Time can be adjusted during cooking

Bad points
- None to mention

85%
LG MS3840SRSK

Good points
- Excellent for cooking broccoli and defrosting mince and chicken
- Easy to use and clean
- Sensor cook and reheat function
- Time can be adjusted during cooking
- Multi-stage cooking
- Includes vegetable steamer

Bad points
- None to mention

86%
Sharp R395YS

Good points
- Excellent for cooking broccoli and defrosting mince
- Very good for defrosting a chicken and reheating
- Time can be adjusted during cooking
- Sensor cook and reheat function
- Melt and soften function
- Keep-warm function

Bad points
- No auto-reheat

82%
Sharp R200YW

Good points
- Excellent for cooking broccoli and defrosting mince
- Very good result for defrosting a chicken
- Auto-cook and reheat functions
- Easy to clean
- Lowest annual running costs

Bad points
- Overall volume is comparatively small
- Time can't be adjusted during cooking
- Small rotation area can only accommodate a dinner-sized plate with no handles

PREVIOUSLY TESTED

Panasonic NN-ST557W	$199
LG MS2548GR	$179
Panasonic NN-ST680S	$359
Samsung ME6104ST	$249

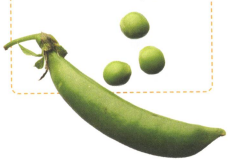
ABOUT THE REST

The **Sanyo EMS8588V** is only borderline for reheating, but the **Midea** and **Omega OA138X** fare even worse in this test with poor results.

The **Breville BM0300** is only OK for ease of use. It has poor visibility through the door, and while its controls are fairly basic, you may need to refer to the manual initially to program foods for auto-cook. Many holes on the inside and a stainless steel exterior also make for more effort when cleaning.

The **Panasonic NN-ST671S** is only OK for ease of use and reheating. The **NN-SF550W** flatbed model is only OK for ease of use and reheating and borderline for defrosting mince.

The **Samsung ME6124ST** is the only newly tested model to get an excellent result for reheating, but scores lowest for ease of use – its visibility through the door is very poor and operations prompts are small. Small holes inside and a stainless steel exterior mean more effort when cleaning. ■



Nutshell

- One vac on test is excellent for removing dirt from carpet, but you pay for the privilege.
- Barrel cleaners still dominate the Australian market over uprights.

Star performer

Matthew Steen dishes the dirt on a high-end vac with the highest rating for dirt removal we've seen in years.

We're happy to recommend vacuums with a very good dirt removal score – after all, this is the primary purpose of a vacuum cleaner. The Sebo Airbelt K3 Premium achieves an excellent 92%. We can't comment on its reliability, as the last time we conducted the CHOICE reliability survey, we didn't get enough responses for the Sebo brand. For results of our latest reliability survey, go to choice.com.au/applicancereliability.

You'll notice there's only one new upright cleaner on test – that's because barrel cleaners dominate the market in Australia. Barrel cleaners rely mostly on suction to remove dirt from the carpet, except for a few that come supplied with a power head that agitates the carpet to remove more dirt from deeper within. The more dirt removed, the longer your carpet will last, as the fine grains that sever threads of the carpet are removed. We test vacuums using the power head whenever it's supplied with the vac.

Best of both worlds?

We included the Miele Hybrid S4812, which can be battery- or mains-powered. It achieved 61% for dirt removal and lasts for 10 minutes on battery power. It could be useful for jobs such as cleaning the car; however, you may want to opt for a less expensive handheld or stick vac.

WHAT TO BUY

88%

Sebo Airbelt K3 Premium, $1099

Good points

- Excellent for picking up dirt
- Good range of tools
- Very good bag is easy to remove and replace
- Excellent controls, located on the wand

Bad points

- The hose feels flimsy

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Light, **quiet** and **easy to manoeuvre** Try a vacuum in the shop to see if it's all these things over carpet and hard surfaces.

A **turbo brush** has a rotating brush driven by airflow, while a **power head** uses an inbuilt motor. Our testing shows the power head to usually be more effective.

Adjustable head height allows you to adjust the height of the cleaning head's bristles to the length of the carpet pile or for when you're vacuuming hard surfaces.

The standard **tools** to check for are dusting, crevice and upholstery brushes.

Variable power/suction allows you to lower the suction for delicate jobs, such as cleaning curtains.

HEPA (high-efficiency particulate air) filter is an international standard for filters that trap particles, which can help if you have asthma or a dust allergy or sensitivity.

A **telescopic wand** lets you adjust the wand to suit your height so you don't have to bend too much.

Dust collector Unlike a bag vacuum a bin model has no ongoing costs, but it can be messy to empty.

WHAT TO BUY (continued)

83%
Nilfisk Extreme X300, $749

Good points
- Very good at picking up dirt
- Good range of tools
- Very long power cord
- Excellent controls, located on the wand

Bad points
- None to mention

83%
Zelmer Solaris VZ5000HQ, $649

Good points
- Very good at picking up dirt
- Good range of tools
- Very long power cord
- Very good bag is easy to remove and replace
- The hose feels solid

Bad points
- Cleaning head is quite tiring to move over the carpet

82%
Dyson Stowaway DC23 Motorhead, $1099

Good points
- Very good at picking up dirt
- Good range of tools
- Very long power cord

Bad points
- Very heavy to carry
- Noisiest model on test
- Bin is messy to clean
- The hose feels flimsy

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	COSTS				SCORES							FEATURES							SP
	Price ($)	Cost per bag ($) *	Annual running cost ($)	Type	Overall (%)	Dirt removal from carpet (%)	Ease of use (%)	Cleaning corners and edges (%)	Pet hair removal (%)	Power head / Turbo brush	Crevice tool / Upholstery tool / Dusting brush	On-board storage	Variable suction control	Variable power	HEPA filter	Power (W) **
# **Sebo** Airbelt K3 Premium	1099	4.13	18.30	Barrel	88	92	82	80	100	✓/–	✓/✓/✓	✓		✓	✓	160
Bosch BSG81266AU/10	599	4.25	15.00	Barrel	83	78	83	81	100	–/✓	✓/✓/✓	✓		✓	✓	127
# **Nilfisk** Extreme X300	749	5.49	18.00	Barrel	83	80	79	81	100	–/✓	✓/✓/✓	✓		✓	✓	157
# **Zelmer** Solaris VZ5000HQ	649	4.74	19.40	Barrel	83	83	77	79	100	✓/–	✓/✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	170
# **Dyson** Stowaway DC23 Motorhead	1099	na	15.80	Barrel	82	84	75	70	100	✓/–	✓/✓/✓	✓			✓	138
# **Electrolux** Ultra Active Cyclonic ZUA3861P	649	na	19.70	Barrel	82	81	76	80	100	✓/–	✓/✓/✓	✓		✓	✓	172
Electrolux Ultra One Z8821PT	600	3.75	18.00	Barrel	82	74	81	86	100	–/✓	✓/✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	154
# **Electrolux** Ultra One S-Bag Z8870P	799	4.32	19.00	Barrel	82	80	76	80	100	✓/–	✓/✓/✓	✓		✓	✓	166
# **Miele** Medicair 5000 Plus S5281	649	4.98	20.00	Barrel	82	77	80	80	100	–/–	✓/✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	175
# **Miele** Hybrid S4812	1099	4.98	18.80	Barrel	81	75	79	80	100	–/–	✓/✓/✓	✓	✓	✓		164
# **Bosch** Roxx'x Animal Sensor BGS6225AU	799	na	19.80	Barrel	80	76	75	82	100	–/✓	✓/✓/–	✓		✓	✓	173
Electrolux Ultra Active ZUA3860P	650	na	20.00	Barrel	80	75	77	80	100	✓/–	✓/✓/✓	✓		✓	✓	176
LG Kompressor VK9820UHAQ	700	na	17.00	Barrel	80	73	77	86	100	–/✓	✓/✓/✓	✓		✓	✓	153
# **Bosch** Roxx'x Pro Silence BGS6SIL1AU	699	na	14.80	Barrel	77	75	73	79	90	–/–	✓/✓/–	✓		✓	✓	129
Miele Power Plus S7210	799	5.50	13.00	Upright	77	78	69	70	100	✓/–	✓/✓/✓	✓		✓		113
Nilfisk Extreme Free X250	599	4.20	18.00	Barrel	76	64	78	81	100	–/✓	✓/✓/✓	✓		✓	✓	156
# **Sebo** Airbelt K1 Pet	740	4.13	17.60	Barrel	76	57	84	84	100	–/✓	✓/✓/✓	✓		✓	✓	154
Bissell Healthy Home 61Z4-F	699	na	14.00	Upright	75	81	53	75	100	✓/✓	✓/–/✓	✓			✓	125
# **Dyson** DC25 Ball Hepa Plus (A)	999	na	13.50	Upright	75	76	64	70	100	✓/✓	✓/✓/✓	✓			✓	118
Dyson DC33	649	na	15.00	Upright	74	73	65	70	100	✓/–	✓/✓/✓	✓				134
Wertheim W6035	1499	4.25	20.00	Barrel	72	69	71	57	100	✓/✓	✓/✓/✓	✓ (B)		✓	✓	173
Dyson Compact DC26 HEPA	600	na	12.00	Barrel	69	53	81	85	70	–/–	✓/✓/✓	✓	✓		✓	103
LG Kompressor VK9220NH	499	na	17.00	Barrel	66	65	78	59	50	–/–	✓/✓/✓	✓ (B)	✓	✓	✓	151

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of: dirt removal from carpet (40%), ease of use (30%), cleaning corners and edges (15%) and pet hair removal (15%). All models score 100% in t out at about 60dB, while city traffic is measured at about 80dB. **Features** See What to Look For, page 69. **Annual running costs** are based on one hour's use per week at 22c/kWh. **Price** Recommende are usually available in packs of three or more and sometimes includes filters as well. ** Measured. **na** Not applicable. **(A)** Discontinued, but may still be available in some stores. **(B)** For two tools only.

82%
Electrolux Ultra Active Cyclonic ZUA3861P, $649

Good points
- Very good at picking up dirt
- Good range of tools
- Very long power cord
- Excellent controls located on the wand

Bad points
- Cleaning head is quite tiring to move over the carpet
- The bin is messy to clean

82%
Electrolux Ultra One S-Bag Z8870P, $799

Good points
- Very good at picking up dirt
- Good range of tools
- Very long power cord
- Excellent controls located on the wand

Bad points
- Very heavy to carry
- Cleaning head is quite tiring to move over the carpet
- The paper bag is fiddly to replace

82%
Miele Medicair 5000 Plus S5281, $649

Good points
- Good at picking up dirt from carpet
- Good range of tools
- Very good bag is easy to remove and replace

Bad points
- The hose feels flimsy

81%
Miele Hybrid S4812, $1099

Good points
- Good at picking up dirt from carpet
- Can be run on its built-in battery for about 10 minutes (recharging takes only three hours)
- Good range of tools
- Very good bag is easy to remove and replace

Bad points
- The hose feels flimsy

80%
Bosch Roxx'x Animal Sensor BGS6225AU, $799

Good points
- Good at picking up dirt from carpet
- Very long power cord

Bad points
- The bin is messy to clean
- The hose feels flimsy

	Reach from power point (m)	Noise (dB)	Weight (kg)	Dust collector volume (L) **	Contact
g	9.6	71	9.8	1.9	sebo.com.au
g	12.3	70	7.6	3.4	boschappliances.com.au
g	12.0	69	9.8	3.2	nilfisk-advance.com.au
g	12.0	69	8.6	3.8	zelmer.com
	10.0	77	10.6	1.3	dyson.com.au
	12.0	72	9.2	1.2	electrolux.com.au
g	12.0	72	8.9	2.7	electrolux.com.au
g	12.0	68	10.0	3.0	electrolux.com.au
g	9.8	69	8.1	2.7	miele.com.au
g	8.6	68	8.3	1.9	miele.com.au
n	10.5	70	9.8	1.2	boschappliances.com.au
n	12.0	72	9.3	1.5	electrolux.com.au
n	12.2	75	8.9	2.0	lge.com.au
n	10.5	65	10.0	1.2	boschappliances.com.au
ag	11.3	72	9.7	4.6	miele.com.au
ag	12.0	70	10.1	2.2	nilfisk-advance.com.au
ag	8.8	70	7.3	1.9	sebo.com.au
n	10.0	78	10.3	1.5	bissell.com.au
n	8.0	76	7.3	1.1	dyson.com.au
in	10.0	76	7.8	1.7	dyson.com.au
ag	12.0	72	11.2	2.2	wertheim.net.au
in	7.8	73	5.3	0.5	dyson.com.au
in	12.2	71	9.0	1.1	lge.com.au

scratch test. **Noise** For comparison, a typical conversation is carried
etail, as of November 2011. **TABLE NOTES** * Approximate. Bags
Newly tested models.

More what to buys

These previously tested and recommended high-end vacs are still available in shops

Bosch BSG81266AU/10, $599

Electrolux Ultra One Z8821PT, $600

Electrolux Ultra Active ZUA3860P, $650

LG Kompressor VK9820UHAQ, $700

To find out how we test vacuum cleaners, go to **choice.com.au/expensivevacs**

Nutshell

- Four more top performers to add to our recommended list, including a good option for small spaces and laundry cupboards.
- Three new washers on test have erratic performance.

Washing woes

Autosensing machines should give you great results – but don't always, says **Martha Psiroukis**.

Many front and top loaders these days have an autosense function, which should mean optimum results for minimal effort. This function adjusts the time, energy and water usage – and in some cases washing action – to suit the weight of each particular load. However, in this test we came across three machines whose autosense functions produce some pretty erratic results.

Ordinarily, we carry out two test runs using identical loads and use the average figure to represent a model's performance. However, in the case of three machines we needed to do three runs – and in one machine's case, four – to achieve meaningful results.

The first test run on the Panasonic Econavi NA-140VG3 used less water and energy than subsequent runs, resulting in very poor dirt removal and rinse performance. Once we retested the machine (twice) we were able to give the scores you see in the table on page 70.

The Bosch WAE22462AU used significantly less energy and was much quicker in the first test run than the second. The third test run was similar to the first, giving us our two results, and the dirt removal was consistent on each run.

The Miele W1913 required four runs before we managed two consistent results, and regardless of the variations in other measures, the dirt removal scores were consistent across three of the four runs.

During normal everyday use you'd expect some inconsistency because of differing load sizes – and you probably wouldn't notice any difference unless the wash result was very poor or the run took an exceptionally long time. Many autosensing machines calibrate themselves during the first few wash loads, so it's very important to follow any instructions, such as doing a cleaning run. We followed the instructions prior to our testing, but in this case the three machines still behaved erratically.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

For comprehensive information on what to look for when buying a washing machine, see *CHOICE*, October 2011 or go to choice.com.au/washers. Here, you can also view details on newly tested models that didn't make our What to Buy list (opposite). For results of our latest reliability survey, go to choice.com.au/appliancereliability.

WHAT TO BUY

UP TO 5.5KG

72%
Whirlpool 6th Sense WFS1055CD

$599

Good points
- Woollens wash for machine-washable woollens
- Extra rinse option
- Only 47cm deep, so good for small spaces and laundry cupboards

Bad points
- Only OK for dirt removal and spin efficiency
- No favourite program

6-7KG

78%
Asko Eco W6884

$1899

Good points
- Very good rinse performance and spin efficiency
- Woollens wash for hand-wash-only items
- Extra rinse option
- Has a hot and cold connection (for solar or cheap hot water benefits)

Bad points
- Long cycle time (has a fast wash for up to 3.5kg)
- No favourite program

6-7KG

77%
Miele W1913

$1999

Good points
- Very good water efficiency
- Woollens wash for hand-wash-only items

Bad points
- We experienced inconsistent time, water, energy use and dirt removal
- No delay start or favourite program

7.5KG OR LARGER

75%
Electrolux Time Manager EWF10831

$1059

Good points
- Very good water efficiency
- Woollens wash for machine washable items
- Extra rinse option

Bad points
- No favourite program

For profiles, and to compare all washing machines on test, go to choice.com.au/washers

OTHER WHAT TO BUYS

These are the top performers in each size category (including those profiled above). The other good performers further down the table (page 70) are also worth considering. For a full profile of previously recommended but current machines here, see the relevant *CHOICE* issue (in brackets) or go to choice.com.au/washers.

SMALL (Up to 5.5KG)

Simpson EZIsensor SWF85561 (fr) (Oct 11), 72%	$689
NEW **Whirlpool** 6th Sense WFS1055CD (fr), 72%	$599

MEDIUM (6KG-7KG)

NEW **Asko** Eco W6884 (fr), 78%	$1899
Asko Quattro W6903 (fr) (Apr 11), 77%	$2499
NEW **Miele** W1913 (fr), 77%	$1999
Electrolux Time Manager EWF1074 (fr) (Aug 09), 74%	$899

LARGE (7.5KG or larger)

NEW **Electrolux** Time Manager EWF10831 (fr), 75%	$1059
Bosch Logixx 8 WAS28440AU (fr) (Mar 09), 74%	$2149

WORTH CONSIDERING

If a long program time isn't a problem for you:

LG WD14030D6 (fr) (Oct 11), 75%	$1499

(fr) = Front loader **(tp)** = Top loader

ISTOCK PHOTO

PERFORMANCE

		Price ($)	Running costs ($ / 10 years)	Type	Overall score (%)	Dirt removal score (%)	Rinse performance score (%)	Gentleness score (%)	Water efficiency score (%)	Spin efficiency score (%)	Water used (L, normal cycle)	Cycle time (min, normal wash)	Noise (dB)
UP TO 5.5KG	**Simpson** SWF85561	689	590	Front	72 (B)	73	77	72	80	62	56	113	6
	# Whirlpool 6th Sense WFS1055CD	599	591	Front	72	69	79	72	74	66	70	136	6
	Simpson SWT 554	689	601	Top / agitator	68	73	76	47	70	58	83	63	6
	LG Fuzzy Logic WF-T556	649	733	Top / impeller	67	68	83	66	57	48	118	58	5
	LG WT-H550	749	724	Top / impeller	67	66	86	62	57	52	118	58	5
	# Fisher & Paykel Quicksmart MW513	649	831	Top / agitator	66	66	89	46	53	67	131	46	6
	LG WF-T507	549	832	Top / impeller	64	67	82	59	47	47	134	63	5
6KG–7KG	**# Asko** W6884 Eco 1800rpm	1899	744	Front	78	77	86	70	73	83	95	150	6
	Asko Quattro 2000rpm W6903	2499	709	Front	77	76	89	73	68	80	96	148	6
	# Miele W1913	1999	494	Front	77	78	71	73	84	79	56	139	6
	Electrolux Time Manager EWF1074	899	688	Front	74 (B)	75	79	76	80	68	69	126	6
	# Bosch WAE22462AU	1299	569	Front	72	66	72	77	80	76	71	90	6
	Fisher & Paykel WH60F60WV1	799	533	Front	72	71	63	72	82	75	55	114	6
	Hoover VHD8144D	799	548	Front	71	67	63	75	83	77	58	104	6
	# Simpson EZIsensor SWF10761	799	663	Front	71 (B)	70	69	76	82	71	63	120	6
	# Fisher & Paykel FabricSmart WA70T60FW1	919	991	Top / agitator	69	70	90	53	56	68	155	51	6
	Fisher & Paykel Washsmart WA70T60GW1	749	945	Top / agitator	68	69	87	51	56	69	153	45	6
	Fisher & Paykel WH70F60W3	909	487	Front	68	65	49	77	85	75	53	113	6
	Ariston ARF105	799	528	Front	65	69	36	75	84	61	58	136	6
	Samsung SW70SP	849	1254	Top / impeller	65	64	96	62	40	51	209	61	6
7.5KG OR LARGER	**LG** WD14030D6	1499	971	Front	75 (C)	75	74	74	84	83	68	190	6
	# Electrolux Time Manager EWF10831	1059	651	Front	75	70	78	74	83	78	67	109	5
	Bosch Logixx 8 WAS28440AU (A)	2149	639	Front	74	67	83	76	78	75	87	73	6
	Miele W5835	2799	495	Front	73	73	61	73	85	81	56	143	6
	Miele W5903	2399	589	Front	73 (B)	78	61	72	86	81	53	143	5
	Electrolux EWF14811	1529	620	Front	72	70	60	74	85	84	58	98	6
	Fisher & Paykel WH80F60W2	1059	562	Front	72	71	63	76	83	73	68	111	6
	LG Direct Drive WD12020D	999	436	Front	72	74	49	74	87	81	50	141	6
	Miele W5741	2199	482	Front	72	77	54	70	85	76	55	143	6
	Siemens WM14S440AU	1949	592	Front	71	61	79	76	80	75	81	75	6
	V-Zug Adora SLQ	4290	588	Front	71	59	74	79	81	82	77	84	5
	# Whirlpool Sports WFS1274CD-C03	999	578	Front	71	69	63	72	84	72	62	151	6
	Bosch WAS24460AU	1599	580	Front	70	62	75	78	79	70	79	69	6
	Bosch WAS32742AU	2599	536	Front	70	68	58	75	82	76	73	127	5
	Samsung WF8750LSW	899	515	Front	70	73	50	73	83	70	64	123	5
	Whirlpool WFE1485BD	1199	698	Front	70	65	68	72	79	78	89	127	6
	LG Turbodrum DD WT-R107	1299	1078	Top / impeller	69	70	84	57	65	62	174	66	5
	Samsung WF0754W7V	1199	473	Front	69	66	60	73	82	77	68	108	5
	Samsung WF8802RPF	1299	539	Front	67	64	55	71	83	71	67	124	6
	Simpson SWT704	899	796	Top / agitator	67	66	76	57	70	63	111	72	5
	Haier HWMP95TL	899	948	Top / impeller	66	72	66	53	73	54	127	84	5
	# Panasonic Econavi NA-140VG3	1449	466	Front	62	70	11	72	89	78	56	138	5

ISTOCK PHOTO

URES				SPECIFICATIONS					
Woollens cycle (machine/hand washable)	Selectable spin speed	Auto-sensing water level	Extra rinse	Tap connection	Coldest wash temperature for normal wash (°C)*	Capacity (kg)	Claimed dimensions (cm, H x W x D)	Contact
–/–	✓	✓		C only	30	5.5	85 x 60 x 54	simpson.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	5.5	85 x 60 x 47	whirlpool.com.au
✓/–			✓	H & C	Cold	5.5	103 x 58 x 63	simpson.com.au
✓/–	✓	✓	✓	H & C	Cold	5.5	91 x 54 x 54	lge.com.au
✓/–		✓	✓	H & C	Cold	5.5	94 x 54 x 54	lge.com.au
✓/–	✓			H & C	Cold	5.5	102 x 65 x 65	fp.com.au
✓/–		✓		H & C	Cold	5	85 x 54 x 54	lge.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	H & C	Cold	7	85 x 60 x 59	asko.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	6	85 x 60 x 59	asko.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓		C only	Cold	7	85 x 60 x 66	miele.com.au
–/–	✓		✓	C only	30	7	85 x 60 x 63	electrolux.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓		C only	Cold	7	84 x 60 x 59	boschappliances.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	6	84 x 60 x 50	fp.com.au
✓/–	✓	✓		C only	Cold	7	85 x 60 x 52	andico.com.au
–/–	✓	✓		C only	30	7	85 x 60 x 54	simpson.com.au
✓/–	✓	✓		H & C	Cold	7	105 x 60 x 60	fp.com.au
✓/–	✓	✓		H & C	Cold	7	105 x 60 x 60	fp.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	7	84 x 60 x 54	fp.com.au
✓/–	✓	✓		C only	Cold	7	85 x 60 x 53	aristonbrand.com
✓/–		✓		H & C	Cold	7	106 x 61 x 67	samsung.com.au
✓/–	✓	✓	✓	H & C	Cold	8.5	85 x 60 x 64	lge.com.au
✓/–	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 63	electrolux.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	8	84 x 60 x 59	boschappliances.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	H & C	Cold	7.5	85 x 60 x 62	miele.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	H & C	30	7.5	85 x 60 x 62	miele.com.au
✓/–	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 63	electrolux.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	8	84 x 60 x 59	fp.com.au
✓/–	✓	✓	✓	H & C	Cold	7.5	85 x 60 x 55	lge.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	7.5	85 x 60 x 62	miele.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 59	siemens.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 60	vzug.com.au
✓/–	✓	✓		H & C	Cold	7.5	85 x 60 x 62	whirlpool.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	7.5	85 x 60 x 60	boschappliances.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 59	boschappliances.com.au
✓/–	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	7.5	85 x 60 x 60	samsung.com.au
✓/–	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	8.5	85 x 60 x 60	whirlpool.com.au
✓/–	✓			H & C	Cold	10	110 x 69 x 72	lge.com.au
✓/–	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	7.5	84 x 60 x 60	samsung.com.au
✓/–	✓		✓	C only	Cold	8	85 x 60 x 60	samsung.com.au
✓/–			✓	H & C	Cold	7.5	107 x 67 x 68	simpson.com.au
–/–				H & C	Cold	9.5	111 x 69 x 69	haierlife.com.au
✓/✓	✓	✓	✓	C only	Cold	10	85 x 60 x 63	panasonic.com.au

Missing models

CHOICE has tested so many washing machines they can't all fit in our table, so we've removed models that have been discontinued (although they may be available in some stores), as well as some models that don't perform well overall. For full details, log on to choice.com.au/washers.

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score is made up of dirt removal (40%), rinse performance (20%), gentleness (15%), water efficiency (15%) and spin efficiency (10%). **Cold wash penalty** As the majority of Australians now wash in cold water straight from the tap, we have applied a small penalty in our overall score to models that cannot do a proper cold wash (at about 20°C) on the normal cycle. While the higher wash temperature may slightly increase a machine's scores for dirt removal and rinse effectiveness, it also means it's using more energy than it would if it were able to do a true cold wash; our penalty compensates for this. **Dirt removal** More accurate than the human eye, a spectrophotometer is used to measure this – differences of about six per cent are visible. **Features** See choice.com.au/washers for details. **Tap connection** Some machines need both hot and cold water to operate. Others connect to cold water only and may need a special connector or sealing cap for the hot water inlet. A machine with a heater (front loaders only) can be particularly useful if you connect to cold only, as it still gives you the option of a warm or hot wash. But a dual connection front loader connected to solar hot water can be more efficient when doing warm or hot washes. **Dimensions** are for the smallest box that fits around the machine, as stated by the manufacturer. **Running costs** This is an estimate of how much it will cost for water and electricity over 10 years if you wash the equivalent of one load every day using a normal cycle, based on 22c/kWh of electricity and $1.50 per 100OL for water. Some machines still draw power when the machine is connected to a power source but not in use, so switch off the machine at the power point when not in use. The running costs don't include detergent which is the largest ongoing cost of running a washing machine, see CHOICE, July 2011 page 38 for laundry detergents cost per wash. **Price** Recommended or average retail, as of December 2011. **TABLE NOTES #** Newly tested models. ***** Cold = cold tap water (20°C). **(A)** The manufacturer recommends using the intensive button for a full load. Using this option will most likely improve the dirt removal and overall score, but time will also be increased. **(B)** Penalty applied because the machine cannot do a cold wash – see Cold Wash Penalty, above. **(C)** Even though this machine has a cold wash, it heats the first rinse water to 30°C, so is penalised for this.

Might is right

When it comes to pressure cleaning, bigger does appear to mean better, writes **Matthew Steen**.

For really tough cleaning jobs such as removing mould that has built up over time, trees decorating your steps with blackened sap, or just dust layered on the house over the years, a pressure cleaner can be a useful tool to remove dirt and rejuvenate your home. We tested 16 electric-powered and one petrol-powered pressure cleaner to find out which ones are up to the task.

Nutshell

- Pressure cleaners remove built-up dirt, but take care when using them on painted surfaces as they can also strip paint.
- Bigger and heavier generally means better.

Be careful when using one, as the high-pressure jet of water can do a lot of damage if precautions aren't taken. Follow the instructions and be prepared to get dirty, as the pressure of the water tends to blow the dirt you're removing on to objects nearby, namely you. Move anything you don't want to get dirty, and close your car and home windows.

Cleaning ground-in dirt is no quick job; it took our tester five to 10 minutes per square metre. The business end of the lance needs to be very close to the ground to remove dirt, so a long lance will help prevent a sore back. Take care when using these cleaners on painted surfaces, as you may end up removing the paint rather than cleaning it.

If you only occasionally need a pressure cleaner, consider renting one – they can cost less than $90 for four hours. And, as always, check your local water restrictions before using one. Those on test here use up to 520L of water per hour.

WHAT TO BUY

Our recommended products score at least 80% overall and 70% for ease of use.

88%
Stihl RE 108, $399

Good points
- Excellent cleaning performance
- Long hose
- Long lance means less bending
- The trigger is easy to operate
- Wheels make it easier to move around

Bad points
- Heavy
- Gun/lance vibrates a fair bit

86%
Lavor Aussie 20, $499

Good points
- Excellent cleaning performance
- Long hose
- Little vibration of the gun/lance only
- The trigger is easy to operate
- Wheels make it easier to move around

Bad points
- Heavy
- Short lance means you have to bend down a lot while cleaning

OTHER WHAT TO BUYS

Gerni Super 140.2	$539
Mercury L1400 Extra	$439
Gerni Super 130.2	$419
Kärcher K4.650	$499

Big guns

We tested the Ryobi Pressure Washer RPW2400, a heavy-duty consumer cleaner that runs on unleaded petrol. We didn't include it in the table (below) as it's quite different from the other models; nevertheless it scored 87% overall. It's the largest and heaviest cleaner on test, but at $499 not the costliest. It's the only machine to have jet and low-pressure nozzles supplied, but it also has the highest operating pressure, uses 520L of water per hour and is the noisiest (92dB).

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

All pressure cleaners have a **trigger lock** to prevent accidental starting. On electric models only, the motor will not start until the trigger is operated. All models can be used with detergent. The **nozzles** supplied can make a real difference to what you can clean. The three types available are the **rotary nozzle**, which is best for heavily soiled areas such as footpaths and driveways. This makes a circle of pressurised water, often in an intermittent pulse that causes vibrations. The **fan nozzle** provides a wide spray of water and is suitable for large areas that are not too dirty, such as the painted walls of a house. This sort of nozzle can often be adjusted to a tight spray. Use caution with this adjustment, as it can strip paint from a wall at close range. The **pencil nozzle** is a very tight beam of water and good for removing stubborn spots as the pressure is concentrated in a small area.

A **built-in detergent applicator** makes it much easier to use detergent when necessary.

Storing your hose and lance on the cleaner is a better way of keeping your storage area neat and tidy.

Wheels make it easier to manoeuvre the cleaner when using and storing it.

Noise All cleaners on test range between 74dB and 92dB. For comparison, 85dB is the sound of a shouted conversation from two metres away, and 92dB falls into the range of power tools. ■

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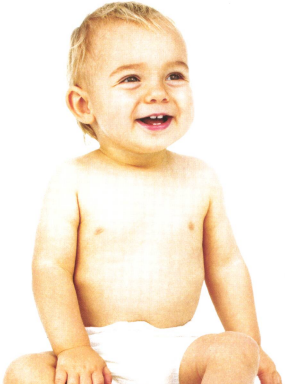
		PERFORMANCE				FEATURES			SPECIFICATIONS				
	Price ($)	Overall score (%)	Cleaning performance score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Noise (dB, fan nozzle)	Fan nozzle	Rotary nozzle	Wheels	Weight (kg)*	Reach from power point (m)**	Lance length (cm)	Claimed operating pressure (bar / psi)	Claimed water consumption (L/hr)	Contact
Stihl RE 108	399	88	95	78	76	✓	✓	✓	18.2	14.2	101	120 / 1740	378	stihl.com.au
Lavor Aussie 20	499	86	95	73	77	✓	✓	✓	14.6	14.0	77	160 / 2321	402	lavorwash.com.au
Gerni Super 140.2	539	84	90	75	80	✓	✓	✓	19.0	15.0	95	140 / 2030	498 (D)	gerni.com.au
Mercury L1400 Extra	439	84	90	76	80	✓	✓	✓	16.7	14.0	98	140 / 2031	408	bargroup.com.au
Gerni Super 130.2	419	83	90	73	78	✓	✓	✓	18.3	12.2	89	130 / 1885	450	gerni.com.au
Kärcher K4.650	499	83	90	73	81	✓	✓	✓	15.2	14.5	77	130 / 1885	402	karcher.com.au
Ryobi RPW140S	369	80	90	65	82	✓		✓	18.1	10.5	79	150 / 2175	402	ryobi.com.au
Lavor Extra 25	749	79	80	78	75	✓		✓	15.8	13.5	85	130 / 1885	450	lavorwash.com.au
Gerni Classic 110.2	199	76	80	71	80	✓(C)	✓	✓	6.9	10.8	84	110 / 1595	440 (D)	gerni.com.au
Kärcher K2.180	149	76	80	69	80	✓(C)	✓	✓	5.6	10.0	77	110 / 1595	330	karcher.com.au
Gerni Classic 100.2	149	74	80	64	78	✓(C)	✓		6.5	11.0	84	100 / 1450	318	gerni.com.au
Jetpower Jet380X	225	72	70	74	76	✓		✓	8.5	11.2	76	140 / 2030	378	jetpower.net.au
Lavor Power 19 (A)	299	70	70	70	74	✓	✓	✓	7.4	11.0	74	130 / 1885	420	lavorwash.com.au
Taurus 7330 (B)	100	70	70	70	80	✓		✓	8.3	10.8	77	120 / 1740	330	aldi.com.au
Kärcher K2.080	99	68	70	65	80	✓(C)			5.0	8.8	76	100 / 1450	330	karcher.com.au
Pope 101HPW1500	99	66	60	75	78	✓		✓	6.1	11.0	77	100 / 1450	300	popeproducts.com.au

USING THE TABLE Scores The overall score comprises cleaning performance (60%) and ease of use (40%). **Price** Recommended retail, as of December 2011. **TABLE NOTES** * Including hose, gun and lance. ** Power cord plus hose. **(A)** Model name changed to Lavor Aussie 19, with same performance and price but more storage and a different appearance. **(B)** Discontinued, but may still be available in some stores. **(C)** Non-adjustable. **(D)** We used the low-pressure figures for these models. High-pressure figures are 420L/hr and 312L/hr respectively.



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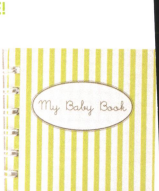

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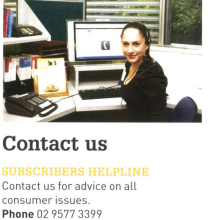

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Hard Word

Usually purveyors of paint-by-numbers hobby crafts, Australian company Hobbytex seems to have diversified its offering lately...

Just in time for Valentine's Day?

Owl Scented Drawliner Vanilla Hazelnut

Fair or fowl?

We would be enraptor-ed if our drawers smelled like owl.

Muscular marketing

It's a catchy moniker, but apparently this Muscle Milk, while "genuine"and "healthy", contains no milk. Nor does it seem to have any cookies or crème...

AMAZING K9 GROOMING

ISTOCKPHOTO

DOGGONE IT!

The look on the face of the dog in the manger says it all, really.

HALF BAKED

CHOICE subscriber Roly Murray will be giving Coles' half-cooked leg ham the cold shoulder.

$7.49 kg
Coles Brand Whole and Half Cooked Leg Ham From the Meat department
Coles Brand Whole and Half Cooked Leg Ham From the Meat department
LOWEST EVERY DAY PRICE
EVERYDAY PROMISE

Thanks this month go to Rosalee O'Grady, Robert Rosen, Peter Kadar, Roly Murray and Peta Cummings. If you have any examples you'd like to share with other CHOICE members, send them with your full name to The Hard Word, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville, NSW 2204. Please don't email us your entries – we need the unmarked originals.

FEBRUARY 2012

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